Marsh closures expose gaps in the food chain - Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) - July 22, 2017 - page 1

Dwindling from four locations to none, the loss of Bloomington's former **Marsh** Supermarkets has exposed the fragile mechanisms that ensure the city's food security.

The last two **Marsh** stores were on the north and east sides of Bloomington. Closure of the northside store earlier this month in particular would have left that quadrant of the city without a full-service grocery.

That uncertainty was cleared up last week when Kroger Co. announced it will open Bloomington's fifth Kroger at the former **Marsh** store. Topvalco Inc., a subsidiary of the Kroger Co. that bought both Bloomington**Marsh** properties in June, is still conducting an economic review of the eastside store.

News of the future northside Kroger fills a gap in a city plan regarding grocery store locations designed more than 20 years ago.

Bill Land, former Bloomington city planner

"You have to be very careful you don't set the ball rolling in the wrong direction," said Bill Land, who was Bloomington's senior long-range planner from November 1989 to May 1994, in an interview earlier this month.

Recent changes to Bloomington's grocery landscape have disrupted what Land described as an intentional, carefully crafted design from the early 1990s that served Bloomington's four points of the compass with essential services. Land said he employed "locational planning" techniques to bring the northside **Marsh Supermarket** to 1825 N. Kinser Pike. The store opened on Oct. 31,1993.

Finding balance

Remembering those 1990s strategy sessions, Land painted a picture of city planners, gathered around a circular table covered in city maps. Because nobody had a compass, one city planner volunteered a shoelace to help draw a circle around key intersections on the city's north, south, east and west sides.

Land said the task force of city planners decided the critical intersections were: North Kinser Pike and the Ind. 45/46 Bypass to the north; East Winslow Road and South Walnut Street to the south; West Third Street and Liberty **Drive** to the west; and East Third Street and the Ind. 45/46 Bypass to the east.

H-T Graphic

The resulting map displayed four circles, each roughly three miles from the next and about four miles away from the opposing point of the compass. Land's recollection of the diagram looks like a baseball diamond, with grocery services planned at each of the four bases. The goal of the diagram was to guarantee residents near those critical intersections were being served while drawing cross traffic through downtown.

City planners then counted the number of residences within a mile of each point, multiplied that number by 2.5 to reflect a more accurate population count and compared that number to the square footage of grocery stores in that same area.

He couldn't remember what ratio city planners used to determine whether an area was under-served. The arithmetic process was more context-based.

"Accuracy was not so appropriate as proximity," Land said. "It's not perfect, but it creates something that's not random."

Land said the city planners found the east side was almost saturated three times over with essential services. The west side was slightly under-served, and the south side had about half the number of grocery stores that

it needed. City planners' greatest concern was the north side, where there were no grocery stores.

Dinner conversation

Tomi Allison was Bloomington's mayor in 1991, when the current city master plan was first adopted — it was revised in 2002 — and was a major force in corralling development in over-served areas while fostering grocery store growth in others, according to Land.

Tomi Allison in 1991

"Our intent was to have services in all sections of the community," Allison said. "We didn't want sprawl. We wanted a walkable, pleasant community. It took a great deal of time and a lot of effort to do this, and all of the stakeholders were involved."

Allison said prior to the 1973 city comprehensive master plan, a large number of multifamily and commercial zoning areas were planned throughout Bloomington without any thought about how the city would grow. Then, in the 1990s, developers came to collect on those zoning allowances, and clusters of development — particularly on the east side — threatened to throw the city off-balance.

In response, Allison said neighborhood associations, developers, property owners, business people and many others in the community came together to find common ground, in addition to city officials.

"A mayor can always use their office to talk with any business about their concerns in working with the community and seeking advice on how a property should be used," Allison said.

To developers upset by the community backlash against groceries in over-served parts of Bloomington, Allison told them, "...'We're not going to rush this. You will have your say. We are working with the whole community. We're not going to rush anything and we're going to work out this stuff.'" In the end, Allison said, they calmed down.

Now, both the northside former **Marsh** and the eastside former **Marsh** at 123 S. **Kingston Drive** exist within planned unit developments. James Roach, city development services manager, outlined in an email to The Herald-Times those permitted uses: the north side is required to have a grocery/drugstore anchor, and the eastside location's only permitted use is a **supermarket**. In his opinion, a new development such as a distribution warehouse would require city review for a use change within either of those planned unit developments.

Missing pieces

When the last two **Marsh** stores closed in July, the temporary vacancy on the north side brought back a problem that had been solved years earlier. Without **Marsh**, there were no longer essential food services on Bloomington's north side, leaving many in the area with limited food options.

Meg Weigel

Meg Weigel, an Indiana University professor and interim chairwoman of the department of environmental and occupational health at the university's School of Public Health, has studied food insecurity internationally.

"It's more complicated than just closing grocery stores when you're talking about food desert and food insecurities," Weigel said. "If you just put in an accessible **supermarket**, you'll be fine, right? There have been some studies done, but it's not as easy as people thought. Diet is really complicated; it's like sex, it's a behavior."

Simply plopping a grocery store down isn't enough, according to Weigel. Most food insecurity stems from poverty, but it can also be influenced by culture, language barriers, individual behaviors, access to transportation, dietary restrictions, time constraints, budgeting issues and more.

Weigel wouldn't say whether she thought the area near the former northside **Marsh** was at risk for food insecurity, but she and Rodrigo Armijos, an associate professor of environmental and occupational health at

Indiana University's School of Public Health, will be conducting a door-to-door study of food insecurity in Bloomington next month.

"We don't really know, in the different neighborhoods, what the food security is," Weigel said. "The USDA assesses these sort of things, and what people are seeing worldwide is not just if you have access to food — it's are you worried about having access to food. It has a psychosocial element to it."

A person may experience food insecurity at a low level and not even realize it. Individuals and families may be food secure and experience no problems, or they may have marginal food security, meaning there are a few indicators of food access problems, such as anxiety about having enough food.

Those who report reduced quality and desirability in their food are experiencing food insecurity. They may substitute beans for meat, but they don't have a reduced food intake. Those identified as having very low food security will have multiple disruptions, and may skip meals or eat smaller portions to provide someone else, perhaps a child, with more food.

Monroe County has the second-highest rate of food insecurity in Indiana, according to the most recent available data by feedingamerica.org. Monroe County has a rate of 17.8 percent, second only to Marion County's 18.6 percent — compared with Indiana's overall figure of 14.4 percent. Even with careful planning at the city level, Monroe County ranked poorly in terms of food security.

It remains to be seen whether a Kroger coming to the northside will adequately serve that area of Bloomington, but what is certain is that Monroe County's poor rating would have only grown had a grocery not moved into the vacant space.

Today's approach

Scott Robinson, planning services manager for the city, said today's challenge is to take what's been laid out and figure out how to deal with outside factors. The zoning for such services exists, and the comprehensive master plan demonstrates desired development, but outside market forces and disruptive technology take the control out of the city's hands.

"The desire for local food is growing, but now there seems to be this question of, 'What's the role of big box grocery?'" Robinson said.

Robinson pointed to delivery grocery services such as Peapod or Blue Apron as sending shockwaves through the grocery industry, but as Weigel said, access isn't always physical distance. Food insecurity is tracked using two metrics: low access and low income, which might mean an individual doesn't have internet or a smart phone to order such services, or enough money to pay for them.

There was a general consensus, Robinson said, that the north side of Bloomington needed a grocery store, but the call comes down to the business. He said when developers come in, they'll sometimes bounce ideas off city staff in an informal setting. That allows city staff to generate interest in a particularly under-served region, or help influence that business's decisions.

Largely, though, safeguards for the appropriate use and placement of grocery stores throughout Bloomington were set decades ago.

No more **Marsh** supermarkets

What has replaced the **Marsh** supermarkets that were once scattered in all corners of Bloomington?

Southside: The **Marsh** at 2424 S. Walnut St. closed in 2007. The building sat empty until Lucky's, which has close ties to Kroger, opened there in 2015.

O'Malia's: Another **Marsh** brand, O'Malia's Food Market at 512 S. College Mall Road closed in late 2014. The building has subsequently become the home of Bloomington's eastside Goodwill thrift store.

Westside: The **Marsh** at 3600 W. Third St. closed in February 2016. Fresh Thyme

Farmers Market opened in that location in spring of this year.

Northside: The **Marsh** at 1825 N. Kinser Pike closed earlier this month. Kroger announced it would open a store in that location after renovations, probably within the next year.

Eastside: Topvalco, Inc., a subsidiary of the Kroger Co., bought the northside and eastside Bloomington **Marsh** stores last month after **Marsh** declared bankruptcy. The company is still evaluating the site at 123 S. **Kingston Drive**, which is not too far from a major Kroger store and a Bloomingfoods co-op, and down the street from a new grocery, slated to be a Whole Foods, that is under construction in College Mall.

More on Kroger

The Kroger brands/banners operating in Indiana are:

- Jay C

- Kroger Co.

- Owen's (two stores in Warsaw)

- Pay Less (Anderson, Lafayette, and West Lafayette – and adding the two stores in Muncie)

- Ruler

- Kroger and Lucky's Market also have a "strategic partnership" that formed last year.

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