

Repairing the Local Food System: Long-Range Planning for People's Grocery

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

West Oakland Context and Existing Conditions

This project is entitled *Repairing the Local Food System: Long-Range Planning for People's Grocery*. People's Grocery is a food justice organization in West Oakland. Their projects currently include a mobile market that drives through the neighborhood selling fresh produce, a network of urban gardens and a stake in the Sunol AgPark, numerous educational programs, and planning for a full-service cooperative grocery store.

Food justice, as stated on the People's Grocery website, means "healthy food for everyone". Local food systems, being rebuilt around the country, are alternatives to the industrial food system that does not serve poor neighborhoods adequately.

West Oakland, in the San Francisco Bay Area, is bounded by the 880, 580 and 980 freeways. This formerly industrial neighborhood is home to 19,000 people, and is plagued by the high unemployment, crime, and diet-related diseases so often found in low-income communities. The neighborhood's population is concentrated in a crescent, excluding industrial and heavy commercial areas. Services are located in this populous crescent. There is a network of corner stores throughout the neighborhood, but inventories are quite limited. Access to fresh food is further restricted by the fact that the closest grocery stores are outside neighborhood boundaries. There is a small but growing collection of community gardens in the neighborhood, along with a large number of vacant lots. Toxic materials, a legacy of the neighborhood's industrial past, can be found throughout the neighborhood and must be taken into account when building in this area. The neighborhood may see rapid change in the near future: many new developments are slated for the area, including two with over 1,500 residential units each.

Food Justice Gap Analysis

Compared to a nearby middle class neighborhood, it is extremely difficult to find fruits and vegetables in West Oakland. Comparing the nearest grocery store to the neighborhood, in the Pill Hill district, with a grocery store in Rockridge, I found similar prices and reasonable selection at each store. However, it should be noted that the Pill Hill store is an overstock outlet, with a wildly fluctuating inventory. A shopper attempting to meet their food needs within West Oakland would have to rely on corner stores. As you can see in the accompanying graphs, it is not high prices, but rather the lack of availability that creates food access problems in West Oakland. If you set out on foot to buy healthy groceries, you simply will not find what you are looking for in this neighborhood.

Understanding Food Justice

As People's Grocery puts it, food justice means *healthy food for everyone*. There are several crucial components to food justice, including the presence of nearby growers, processors and distributors; economic development in the form of job opportunities; political support for the idea that access to healthy food is a human right; education about nutrition and healthy living to create demand for good food; and sales outlets offering a full line of healthy food. West Oakland is currently missing many of these components. Again comparing West Oakland and Rockridge, most Rockridge residents live within walking distance of several different supermarkets, while many West Oakland residents would have to walk a mile or more to reach even one market.

The situation is not without hope. Some organizations, including People's Grocery, are already working for food justice in West Oakland. Others include City Slicker Farms, with their network of market farms

and sliding-scale produce prices; Mo' Better Food Farmers' Market; and a collection of teaching gardens run by Oakland Butterfly and Urban Gardens (OBUGS).

Neighborhood Agricultural Potential

West Oakland has enormous latent potential in the form of vacant lots. This Agricultural Potential Prototype Study is a visualization tool, meant to demonstrate the productive potential of West Oakland's vacant land. I identified three block types in the neighborhood: first, those that are >50% vacant; second, those that are 25-50% vacant; and third, those that are <25% vacant. For study areas representing each block type, I categorized land according to its use (front yard, back yard, building, vacant, etc), assigned an ease-of-conversion factor to each land type, and creating conversion diagrams, which may be thought of as agricultural zoning maps, demonstrating the land's potential. These diagrams could be used to establish Ag Enterprise Zones, or by block associations wishing to build support for new community gardens. This initial study would be followed by detailed site analysis on chosen plots of land.

According to estimates by biointensive growers, one acre of land could provide all the fruits and vegetables needed for ten people. If this is the case, Study Area 1 could feed 13 people, and all the vacant lots in West Oakland, a total of 78.6 acres, could feed 786 people.

Regional Plan for *California Certified Organic Farmers* Member Businesses

Given that the industrial food system doesn't serve West Oakland well, and also doesn't serve small organic growers, how can these communities work together? I mapped the member database for CCOF, and as you can see diverse agricultural products are available throughout the state. I looked for logical ways to cluster growers into geographically defined groups, and used a hierarchical linear clustering algorithm written by Christopher Brown to achieve this. In the Bay Area bioregion and nearby bioregions, there is great agricultural bounty that is currently not getting into West Oakland. I placed new distributors at the geographic center of each Bay Area cluster. This will create short supply chains with food changing hands only a couple of times between field and table, keeping prices affordable for the neighborhood and profitable for growers. If we replace the local and regional distribution infrastructure that has been dismantled over the past few decades, farmers will be able to make a decent living, and fresh, affordable food will be available to our cities.

West Oakland Neighborhood Development Plan

The proposed People's Grocery store has few real competitors within a one-mile radius, and that same area is home to a significant existing population, and several large proposed residential developments. These populations represent a good client base for the new store. The flagship store will be part of a network of smaller stores, teaching gardens, minifarms, and food processing centers, all of which will be described in more detail below.

If all the growers in the nearby agricultural community had to maintain individual distribution and sales relationships with all the large and small stores in West Oakland, the resulting web of relationships would be complex, time-consuming, and expensive. Introducing People's Grocery as a cooperative buying club will simplify life for the managers of small stores and small farms, and result in lower prices for the community, and better profit margins for growers.

West Oakland, 2030

Over the next twenty years, the geography of food in West Oakland will evolve to including local production and processing, and a robust network of large and small stores carrying healthy produce and prepared foods. Neighborhood residents will be employed in every aspect of the food supply chain, from production to processing and retail. The People's Grocery line of foods will be stocked in every neighborhood store, and the People's Grocery flagship store will be a neighborhood gathering place. The wellness village and demonstration garden at the flagship store will help residents maintain healthy

lifestyles, and strategically placed new small stores will ensure walking-distance access to food for every resident. These stores will also provide a model for other corner stores seeking to convert to produce sales. Gardens and minifarms will be established on uncontaminated vacant lots, providing education, food production, and job opportunities. New food processing centers will return much-needed industry to the neighborhood, and the People's Grocery label will help instill local pride. The less-profitable aspects of this model will be subsidized in part by the more-profitable aspects, allowing People's Grocery to act as a catalyst for a renewed local food system.

People's Grocery and Wellness Village Site Design

The grocery store site is meant to be a physical embodiment of the values of People's Grocery. This 15,000 square foot full-service cooperative grocery store is set in a pleasant pedestrian environment with wide, shady walks, seating areas, a bus shelter, and sidewalk bulb-outs at intersections. Safe, high-quality bicycle facilities include a protected bike entrance and parking area. Climate-appropriate planting is used throughout the site. A large food forest demonstration garden forms the centerpiece of the site, with space nearby for a moveable stage to be set up festival days.

People's Grocery and Wellness Village Site Design - Details

Graceful arches mark entrance to the site and the main intersections. The site is transformed from a litter-strewn, forlorn place to a well-cultivated, very green environment. All plants are either edible, or used to attract beneficial insects. The back façade, facing a residential street, is covered in espaliered fruit trees and endowed with a large window onto the cooking school to present a pleasant image to the neighborhood. Trellises over parking spaces keep the site green and cool, infiltration swales handle runoff, and a chess table pocket seating area provides a safe gathering place for people with free time.

People's Grocery and Wellness Village Site Design - Demonstration Garden

The Food Forest Demonstration Garden is based on permaculture principles. Elements that will be common to every teaching garden in the People's Grocery network are found here, including a grand trellised entry, a hand-built gazebo for gatherings, and composting demonstrations. Food forests are designed to maximize planting space and use resources efficiently: a U-shaped sun trap of larger plants and trees along the north and east edges of the site accommodates tall plants without shading out smaller ones; narrow beds at the entrance of the site are used for plants with long harvest periods, such as tomatoes and cucumbers; spiral beds in the rest of the garden maximize planting space and minimize path space for crops like garlic and corn that are harvested all at once; and an herb spiral provides appropriate microclimates for a wide variety of herbs in a small space.

Conclusion

The work presented here is meant to guide and inspire the work of People's Grocery over the next twenty years. Starting with the grocery store, and moving on to the neighborhood and regional plans, this project addresses food justice at several scales and emphasizes local production, self-sufficiency and restoration of knowledge at every step of the way. When infrastructure upgrades and physical improvements are coupled with economic development and education, an entire neighborhood – including its residents – can be uplifted, rather than simply displacing poorer residents.

Oakland is in the process of forming a Food Policy Council. I suggest we also need an organization with the power to enact laws, not just make recommendations. A Department of Food incorporated into the city governance structure will ensure that food justice comes to the top of the city agenda, on equal footing with clean water and well-maintained roads. One of the first tasks of this Department of Food would be to enact minimum food access zoning, to ensure the presence a full-service grocery store within walking distance of every Oakland resident.