

Kansas a Food Desert?



Absence of local groceries troubling K-State center, research to help communities make food accessible.

by Nancy Peterson

PHOTOS COURTESY KSTATE UNIVERSITY

Forgot the hamburger buns? While there was a time when a quick trip to a local grocery could make it easy to complete the meal, in many Kansas communities, the grocery store has closed.

Since 2006, 82 of 213 grocery stores serving Kansas communities with populations of 2,500 or less have closed, said David Procter, director of the Center for Engagement and Community Development at Kansas State University, which organized and recently hosted a Rural Grocery Store Summit (at K-State).

The closing of local grocery stores is not unique to Kansas, said Procter, who noted that the summit attracted nearly 200 participants representing 13 states.

The absence of a grocery or other store selling essential food items within a 10-mile radius is termed a “severe food desert,” he said.

Such designations dot the Kansas landscape in both urban and rural areas, said Procter, who described the goals for the

conference to be initiating dialogue, identifying challenges and opportunities, charting a research agenda, and networking to overcome the challenges and build on the opportunities.

So goes the community

The local grocery has traditionally fulfilled a key role in the community, Procter said.

In addition to the obvious — making wholesome food accessible — grocery stores

have typically anchored community businesses and the community.

And, as an employer, the local grocery store has generated full- and part-time employment opportunities, often with better benefits than larger employers, and revenue from sales taxes to support education, economic development and community improvements.

So, what’s driving the downfall of the local grocery?

The lure of the big-box stores offering lower prices is a factor, but the value of the savings is eroded when travel time and money are factored into the equation.

Driving 10, 15 or 20 miles (each way) to a retail center takes time, and it costs money. Conference presenter Doug Cunningham (from Norfolk, Neb., representing Affiliated Foods) noted that the American Automobile Association reports the current cost of driving a car is 56¢ a mile. That means the minimal cost for a 20-mile round trip is \$11.20.

What often is overlooked, however, is the value of doing business locally, said Leah Tsoodle, K-State Research and Extension ag economist and researcher of grocery shopping preferences in Kansas communities.

For every \$100 spent within a community, \$45 stays within the community and may be circulated within the community as many as seven times, Tsoodle said. For every \$100



► **Above:** The community of Morland, Kan., is determined to reopen Bean’s Country Market, a local grocery that closed in 2006 when the owners retired.

► **Right:** The absence of a grocery or other store selling essential food items within a 10-mile radius is termed a “severe food desert,” said David Procter, director of K-State’s Center for Engagement and Community Development.

spent outside the community, only about \$15 is likely to return to the community.

“Small businesses drive local economies, yet given the combined loss in sales volume, consolidation of wholesalers, increase in minimum orders for delivery, and rising cost of transportation, smaller retailers face increasing challenges that may mean closing their doors,” Procter said.

“Once the grocery store is gone, the closing (or consolidation) of the school often is not far behind,” he said. And, without a grocery store and a school, a community will typically have trouble attracting new residents, and that means property values also will decline.

Looking for solutions

So, what’s a community to do?

If Morland, Kan., a Graham County community of 150, is an example, the answer is “plenty.”

According to Chris Petty, K-State Research and Extension ag agent in the county, the local grocery (Bean’s Country Market) closed in 2006 when the owners retired.

The longtime store building needed updating, and the Morland Community Foundation looked into grant and other funds to help fund the renovation, but learned they were not eligible for the funding because the store was located in the flood plain, Petty said.

While some might have backed away from the project, this community of go-getters pooled resources to hire a civil engineer to evaluate existing zoning.

The business district hasn’t been flooded since the early 1950s (more than 50 years ago), Petty said, so, after studying the landscape, the engineer updated the map to include a more accurate definition of the flood plain. Updating the zoning is expected to reduce insurance premiums for homeowners in the former flood plain and make building a garage or deck possible, he said.

Re-establishing the local grocery also could increase property values, said Petty, who noted that Morland has a bank, grain elevator, popular restaurant, hair salon and newly opened photography studio.

The local grocery and the restaurant (Prairie Junction) are expected to support each other, and that, too, will make the community stronger, said Petty, who explained that they expect to draw grocery customers from Saint Peter, which is located 12 miles south; from Studley, six miles west; and Penokee, six miles east. The combined population of the potential customer service base is 350 people, he said.

Community organizers also have done



► When the Morland Community Foundation members looked into grant and other funds to help fund the renovation of Bean’s Country Market, they learned they were not eligible for the funding because the store was located in the flood plain. They hired a civil engineer to help with rezoning efforts to strengthen their community.

K-State summit sparks conversation on rural groceries

In a small community, the presence of a grocery store can be an indicator of stability, and maybe even growth. Yet, in many rural communities, variable consumer loyalty and competition from superstores is affecting the availability of food in rural areas.

Rural grocery stores are finding it difficult to keep their doors open, said David Procter, director of the Center for Engagement and Community Development at Kansas State University (K-State), speaking at the Rural Grocery Store Summit at K-State June 14.

According to Procter, 51% of Kansas communities now lack a grocery store. As a result, he said, rural citizens are finding it more difficult to find access to fresh produce and a variety of nutritious foods.

Many who have experienced the loss of a community grocery store, or who are concerned about the potential loss of the store in their community, shared their frustrations at the summit.

The summit sought to address this issue in its session titled “Improving Access to Locally Grown Foods in Rural Grocery Stores,” which featured three speakers.

► Tracey Giang from the Food Trust organization gave examples of many projects the Food Trust has undertaken, such as the Farmer’s Market Program, which started more than 30 farmer’s markets in underserved areas of Philadelphia. Giang said that this project and others like it could be easily applied to rural areas.

► Pete Garfinkel from Kansas Rural Center discussed a project that will work like an online brokerage system and link local farmers and ranchers with people or businesses that want to purchase local foods in Kansas.

► Becki Rhoades from the Kansas Department of Commerce commented on the benefits stores can receive from buying and selling Simply Kansas products. Simply Kansas membership offers many benefits to store owners, including eligibility for the Business Enhancement Grant for marketing development.

The session was one of many included in the day-and-half conference in Manhattan, which was organized by the Center for Engagement and Community Development at K-State and co-sponsored by Kansas Small Business Development Center, Affiliated Foods Midwest, Kansas Department of Commerce, Simply Kansas, Floyds’ Super Market (Sedan, Kan.), GDi Retail Consulting, NetWork Kansas, Blacksmith Coffee Roastery, Farmers Insurance Group: Bob Joyce Insurance Agency, Joe Smith Co., Pottawatomie County Economic Development and Village Market Holdings.

For more information visit www.dce.k-state.edu/conf/ruralgrocery/.

— by *Bethany Sanderson, K-State*

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their homework in working with Tsoodle and Paul Clark, a former K-State ag economist, to develop and conduct a customer survey to learn more about the products and services prospective customers want.

In developing the survey (funded by K-State's Center for Engagement and Community Development), ag economists focused on respondents' preferences in the grocery shopping experience with a follow-up section asking the respondents to rate how their current shopping experiences are meeting their expectations.

With a 30% response rate for such surveys considered excellent, the more than 40% response rate to the Morland survey reflected strong interest in the question of re-establishing the local grocery, Tsoodle said.

Overall, the responses were positive and encouraging to the Morland community

organizers, she said. Eighty percent of the respondents identified quality of food as a reason for choosing to shop at a grocery store; 77% cited cleanliness of the store and store personnel, and 57% noted customer service as reason to shop at a grocery store.

Results from the survey also indicated that 95% of the respondents would likely purchase locally grown foods, the ag economist said.

The community has received verbal approval on the change in zoning, but is waiting for formal (written) approval to move forward, said Faye Minium, president of the Citizens State Bank and member of the Morland Community Foundation.

The foundation has applied for and received a commitment in stimulus

funds to cover the majority of the renovations, but the money cannot be awarded until the zoning process is complete, Minium said.

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— Leah Tsoodle

“We’re ready to move forward, and hope to be open later this year,” said Petty. The local store is initially expected to employ a manager and one to two assistant managers.

“The grocery store is an essential part of a community,” Minium said. For now, however, it’s not unusual for neighbors to loan a cup of flour, sugar or, recently, an onion.

For more information about the Rural Grocery Store Initiative and Summit, contact David Procter (Center for Engagement and Community Development at K-State) at 785-532-6868 or dprocter@ksu.edu or visit their website at www.ruralgrocery.org. More information about the grocery store survey developed by K-State ag economists Leah Tsoodle and Paul Clark is available from Tsoodle at 785-532-1517 or ltsoodle@ksu.edu. And, more information about the efforts to re-establish a local grocery store in Morland, Kan., is available from Chris Petty at 785-421-3411 or cgp@ksu.edu.



Editor’s Note: *Nancy Peterson is a communications specialist with K-State Research and Extension.*