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CAPITAL

Produce-cart program a modest success

BY DAN GOLDBERG 4:58 A.M. | JUL. 7, 2014



New York City's Green Cart program, designed to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income city neighborhoods, allotted 1,000 vendor permits in 2008.

The project underscored everything the Bloomberg administration stood for, in terms of its public health methods: data-driven initiatives, public-private partnerships and a commitment to reducing obesity in low-income neighborhoods.

Six years later, there are only an estimated 166 carts operating across New York City, [according to a recently released report](#) from the School of Public Affairs at Columbia University. The report found there are no green carts in Staten Island and only a handful in Queens. That's not the smash hit the city had hoped for, but community organizers, public officials, philanthropists and the authors of the Columbia report agree that some small fixes could make a big difference. Suggestions include cutting red tape, making wholesale purchasing easier and providing more access to storage space across the city.

The relatively few vendors does not signify a lack of success, said Laurie Tisch, the Green Cart program's primary sponsor, who put more than \$1 million of her foundation's money behind the program. Tisch's Illumination Fund also paid for the Columbia report.

“When they set out, they talked about 1,000 green carts on the streets but that was a total guess,” Tisch said. “Nobody knew what the capacity was, so the fact they found 166 carts is fantastic.”

Where the carts have worked, they have worked well, according to the report.

“This finding, that most Green Carts are located in areas with relatively low produce store density, indicates that Green Carts is achieving its goal of reaching populations in high need neighborhoods,” the report states. “At the same time, more operating carts would be necessary to reach other high need areas in the Green Carts zones.”

Of the 166 carts, 58 are in the Bronx, according to the Columbia report. And only in Manhattan are there carts near NYCHA housing, where there are a high concentration of low-income residents.

“In Brooklyn, where there are Green Carts, the average distance between a Green Cart and public housing is 14 blocks. However, in Brownsville and East New York, two communities with large low-income populations, there are no carts,” the report found. “In the Bronx, where there are Green Carts, the average distance of a Green Cart to public housing is approximately five

city blocks. However, many of the largest public housing developments in the Bronx have no Green Carts nearby.”

When the program began, many celebrated the attempt to address public health disparities that manifested themselves in the lack of fresh foods in certain neighborhoods.

The press release announcing the Green Cart program said the health department had found that only 3 percent of bodegas in Harlem carry leafy green vegetables as compared to 20 percent on the Upper East Side.

The Green Cart concept was simple: obesity, diabetes, hypertension and a host of other ailments are more prevalent in certain communities, in part, because those residents lack access to cheap, healthy food. That means those communities are spending their money on high-calorie, low-nutrition food. Bring more fresh fruits and vegetables to the area and health will improve.

The initiative seemed ripe to take off. Maps were drawn that showed where food was already sold, highlighting the best places to set up shop. There was strong support from city leadership, which hoped for 1,500 permits around the city. But there was also strong opposition from local businesses including the Korean Grocers Association, bodega owners, Business Improvement Districts and the National Supermarket Association, who worried the Green Carts would eat into their business. A compromise was reached and the number of permits was reduced to 1,000 from 1,500.

“It was ingenious,” said Kerry McLean, a director of community development at WHEDco, a community based organization that works with Green Cart vendors. “It just needs tweaking.”

One problem, said McLean, is that there aren't commissaries throughout New York. Vendors need a place to store their fruits and vegetables when they day is done. And it's really beneficial if they have access to a refrigerator, which can allow them to keep their stock longer. That reduces waste and loss.

The Columbia report found that 81 percent of vendors said they “are satisfied or very satisfied” with Green Cart storage options but that can be misleading. The ones who are unsatisfied might just give up, and the high satisfaction rate may be driven by vendors who are clustered and failing to reach certain neighborhoods.

McLean said WHEDco offers storage space at its Intervale Green building in the Bronx, a modest solution to the problem. It had planned to charge vendors for the space but has not done so yet, McLean said.

The city, she said, needs to find more spaces for commissaries if the program is to expand.

This is not a new idea. In 2010, the Citizens' Committee for Children released a report, [which can be found on the health department's website](#), that said “vendors indicated that cart storage was an issue because it is costly to store carts and because the transportation of carts requires that they purchase or rent a van with a commercial license plate.”

“In addition,” the C.C.C. report found “(vendors) explained that those commercial vehicles cannot be parked at their homes, so vendors assume an additional cost of parking the vans elsewhere. Five of the vendors interviewed on the street also expressed interest in assistance with transporting their carts to the vending locations.”

Columbia's report noted that 83 percent of vendors pay for their storage, and that many vendors reported rental costs of \$150 per month.

Fulgencio Jimenez-Reyes has been operating a cart in the shadow of the Freeman subway station in the Bronx since early March, when he moved from Boynton Ave. and Westchester Ave. He chose his new spot, he said, because there were fewer competitors and because he could access WHEDco's storage space.

Without that, he said through a translator, it would not have been as easy.

“WHEDco offered me a place to store my cart,” he said.

Jimenez-Reyes illustrates another sticky problem for the program.

Vendors want to locate in highly trafficked areas, near busy subway stops, bus stops and cross streets. That's where there is foot traffic, and as a result some areas have several vendors almost on top of one another while other neighborhoods have none at all.

"If the program goal is to ensure that the heart of the food desert is also served, the City should provide economic incentives to locate in areas that have not yet been penetrated by the Green Carts," Columbia's report said.

Critics of the program have argued that the business strategy is fundamentally flawed because lower-income people won't spend enough money to purchase fruits and vegetables.

Last month, WNYC's Brian Lehrer asked city health commissioner Mary Bassett a similar question about stocking fresh produce on Bronx shelves.

"That's an argument that is frequently made," Bassett said. "People in poor neighborhoods want good food. People are willing to pay for it. The demand is there and our job is to ensure the produce is there for people to buy."

McLean said the fact that there aren't more carts has to do with the red tape vendors must go through before they can be licensed to operate one, which required a lot more than just applying for a Mobile Food Vending License from the city's health department.

Once that application is accepted, prospective vendors must submit an application to be placed on the Green Cart waiting list. Vendors are chosen from that list via lottery and then have 30 days to complete a separate application and pay a \$75 fee. Then, vendors have six months to buy a cart and present it for inspection. And before any of that can happen, they must take a food-safety course.

Another area to think about improving, McLean said, is purchasing.

Most vendors, Jimenez-Reyes included, head to Hunts Point before dawn to purchase what they need wholesale and then disperse throughout the city. That might help explain why so many are located in the Bronx. If you don't have a van, and many don't, moving fruits and vegetables around is not an easy task. If you do have a van, tolls and gas can eat into a low-margin business.

The initial Green Carts proposal called for the development of a single wholesale distributor to provide produce at a lower cost to vendors. This wholesaler would sell the produce at a loss, which would be covered either by the city or the Tisch money. But that part of the program never got off the ground.

Former mayor Michael Bloomberg was correct when he recently said obesity is the only public health problem that is getting worse. In the 12 years he was mayor, the city's obesity rate rose 25 percent.

Nearly 60 percent of city residents are obese or overweight, [according to the state health department](#).

Nearly [40 percent](#) of city school children are overweight.

But the top-line numbers only tell part of the story.

The obesity rates in New York's lower-income neighborhoods are far higher than in wealthier areas. In Bedford-Stuyvesant-Crown Heights for example, the adult obesity rate is at 33 percent. On the Upper West Side, the obesity rate is 12 percent. Deaths related to diabetes were 2.3 times higher in low-income neighborhoods than in wealthier neighborhoods.

The thing about New York City is that we are a food desert like no other. Food deserts are typically found in rural areas where all types of food is scarce. New York City, however, is inundated with food, but a lot of it is junk food meaning New York isn't so much a food desert as a fat farm.

New administrations come with new priorities but the de Blasio health department insists they haven't forgotten about the Green Cart program.

Elliott Marcus, manager of the Bureaus for Food Safety and Community Sanitation and Child Care at the city's health department, said the city has heard some good suggestions and is exploring options to improve the program.

One example, is that the city has already allowed for larger carts, which allows vendors to offer more produce.

“There have been several suggestions that make a lot of sense,” said Marcus, but there is a limit to what the health department can do. It is a regulatory agency and bold ideas will either have to come from the private sector or be approved by the City Council.

That said, Marcus counts the program as a success both because it has created greater access here in New York and because the model has been replicated in cities across the nation. Philadelphia, San Jose and Washington D.C. have implemented similar programs with varying degrees of success, but the idea of getting more fruits and vegetables to poorer communities has clearly taken root.

“We certainly would have liked to have seen a bigger uptake,” Marcus said. “But the most important thing we did is we added to the conversation that was developing in America around obesity. ... This became part of the active initiative by governments to promulgate more fruit and vegetable consumption by people.”

Tisch feels the same, saying the fact that the program is still in existence and could be bolstered by a few tweaks is enough to celebrate.

“You ask, 'are you disappointed?' No, because 1,000 might not have been the right number and there are 200 new points of access and 350 new jobs,” she said.

“This was originally supposed to be a three-year program. It made me excited to know it is mostly working. If there are things to do to tweak it, it is absolutely worth it," she said. "I'm happy to know it mostly worked. Maybe it will just take a couple years to go from the 20 yard line to a touchdown.”

Link to full article can be found [here](#).