

Request for Information

Community Focused Grocer Network:

Addressing Food Deserts in Nashville and Davidson County



Economic and Community Development

Office of Mayor Freddie O'Connell

1 Public Square, Suite 100

Nashville, TN 37201

Dear Neighbors,

Access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious food is a fundamental necessity. And for too many Nashvillians, putting healthy meals on the table is a daily challenge.

More than 40,000 Davidson County residents live in food deserts—communities where healthy grocery options are scarce or out of reach. In areas of Davidson County without access to fresh affordable food close to home, working families, seniors, and children face compounding barriers to health and opportunity—challenges that impact the well-being of our entire city.

For years, local service providers, non-profits, urban farmers, and neighborhood grocers have stepped in to bridge the gap, often with heroic effort. Their work has kept many of our families nourished and held communities together. The challenge before us is systemic, and it demands a broader, coordinated response.

That's why my administration is taking action. Today, we're taking action by launching a **Request for Information (RFI)** to hear directly from those closest to the issue—community leaders, grocery operators, food advocates, developers, farmers, and residents. We're seeking innovative, enduring ideas to bring community-focused grocery stores to underserved areas.

This RFI isn't a formal proposal request—it's an open invitation for ideas. We're looking to learn from the experiences of residents, community partners, and industry experts to better understand what's working, what's not, and what new approaches might help improve food access in every neighborhood, and how Metro can be a bridge builder to healthier outcomes.

If you have knowledge to share—I invite you to respond to the RFI and help us spread the word. Your insight will guide our next steps, inform future partnerships, and ultimately help shape a Nashville where no one goes hungry because of where they live.

Thank you for being part of the solution. Let's build a more food-secure city, together.

Sincerely,

Freddie O'Connell

Mayor

Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County

I. Background

Overview

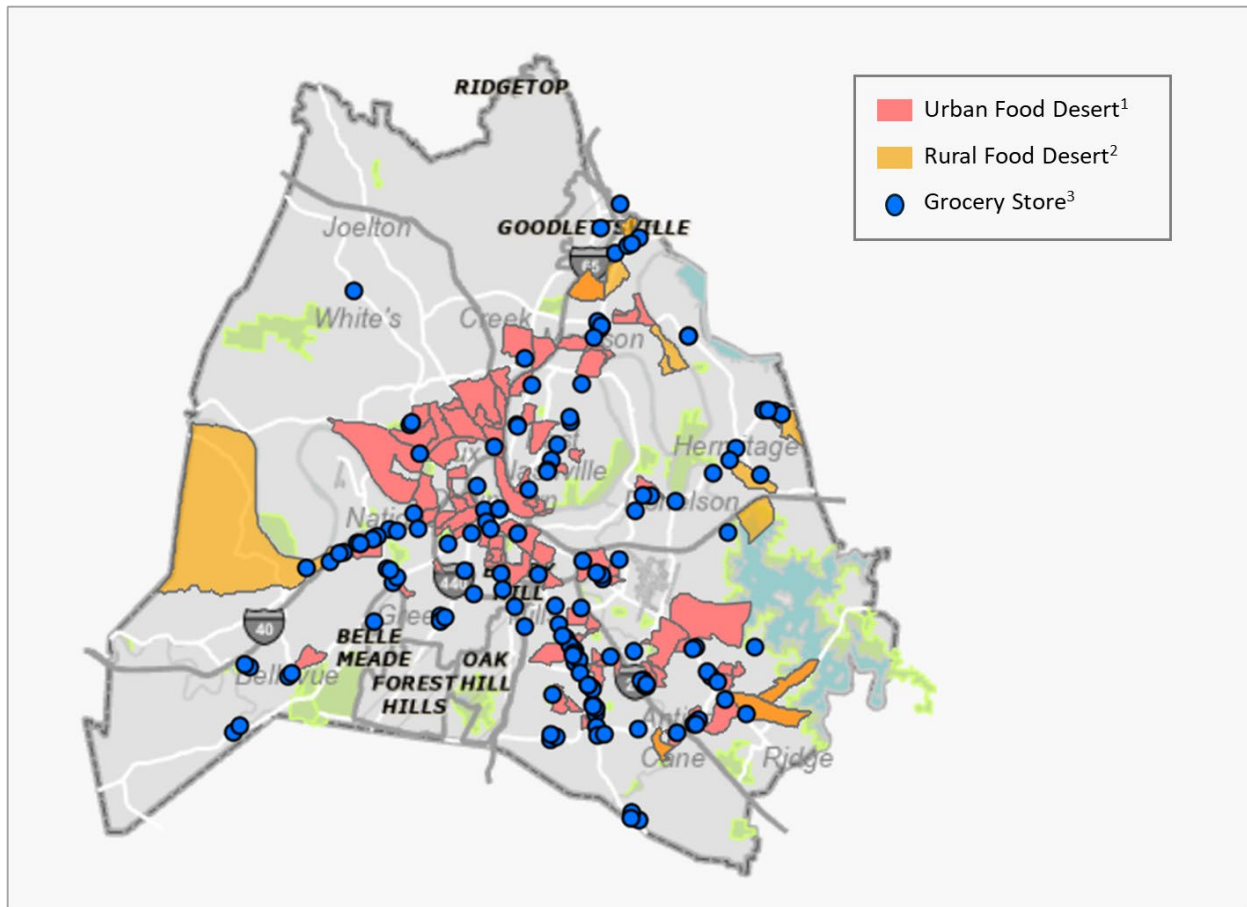
The Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County (Metro Nashville) is actively seeking innovative and sustainable solutions to combat food deserts and improve access to healthy, affordable food for all residents. This request for information (RFI) is a critical step in exploring alternative models to address this pressing issue. We invite feedback, insights, and recommendations from a diverse range of stakeholders, including grocery store operators, non-profit organizations, and developers, to help shape the future of food access in Nashville. Your input will be instrumental in developing effective strategies and partnerships to create a more equitable and food-secure community.

Introduction

Metro Nashville recognizes the critical intersection of affordable housing, economic opportunity, and access to essential resources, particularly nutritious food. An average population growth of ~2% year over year and an increased cost of living over the past decade have exacerbated existing challenges related to food access, creating an unequal landscape of food deserts across the city¹. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food deserts as low-income census tracts where a significant portion of residents experience limited access to supermarkets or large grocery stores. A more specific definition designates food deserts as areas with a 20% or higher poverty rate in which at least one-third of the population lives more than one mile away from a supermarket. Furthermore, food deserts differ based on population density, with low-income urban census tracts typically classified as food deserts when a significant number of residents live more than half a mile from the nearest supermarket, and rural tracts when residents are more than ten miles away. These challenges disproportionately affect residents earning fixed or lower income across the city.

¹ **U.S. Census Bureau.** *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Metropolitan Statistical Areas: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2024.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024. Data analyzed to determine an average annual population growth rate of 1.89% for the Nashville MSA from 2015 to 2024. Accessed March 6, 2025. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/metro-area.html>.

Food Desert Tracts in the Nashville Metropolitan Area



*i. 1. Urban Food Desert defined as an area with a 20% or higher poverty rate and in which at least 1/3 of the population lives more than 1/2-mile away from a supermarket or grocery store. 2. Rural Food Desert was defined as an area with a 20% or higher poverty rate and in which at least 1/3 of the population lives more than 10-miles away from a supermarket or grocery store. 3. Grocery store was defined as store that sells fresh produce among other staple grocery items, is currently operational, and is open at least 5 days a week during normal operating hours (i.e. not a farmer's market nor convenience store).

ii. Data compiled from 2020 Census Geographies with Decennial Census Attributes and 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, joined and analyzed by the Tennessee Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team using block group-level data from Metro Nashville's organizational data portal.

In Nashville's urban core, approximately 25.4% of residents—roughly 128,000 individuals—live in designated food desert areas, where access to a full-service grocery store is more than a half mile walk away. Of those, an estimated 39,000 individuals also live below the poverty line, reflecting the significant overlap between food insecurity and economic hardship. In rural areas, while food deserts affect a smaller percentage of the population, approximately 4,800 residents face similar access barriers, with over 1,100 of individuals

also experiencing poverty. Altogether, more than 40,000 low-income individuals—representing approximately 6% of Davidson County’s population—live in areas that meet the USDA’s definition of a food desert². These overlapping challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both geographic access and affordability, particularly in historically underserved communities such as North Nashville, Madison, Antioch, Napier-Sudekum, Haynes Manor, and Bordeaux.

A related but distinct issue is food insecurity which refers to a household's ability to acquire adequate food being limited by a lack of money and other resources including transportation. In Nashville, this often manifests as areas where supermarkets exist, but many residents cannot afford to shop there due to pricing aimed at middle- or upper-income populations.

This issue is compounded by the economic realities facing grocery stores, particularly in underserved areas. Grocery stores typically operate on thin profit margins, often between 1% and 3%³. Simultaneously, land values in Nashville have increased substantially in recent years. This rise creates a financial squeeze, making it increasingly difficult for grocery stores to operate profitably, especially in areas with lower population density or high poverty rates. As these profit-centric businesses struggle to remain viable, store closures exacerbate food access challenges. This particularly impacts residents without reliable access to transportation. Nashville's rapid population and housing growth has contributed to these rising land values, disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities.

While numerous non-profit organizations, including Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee, Nashville Food Project, the Store, the Nashville Community Garden Coalition, and many more, are dedicated to mitigating food insecurity, their efforts alone cannot fully address the systemic issue of food deserts.

The absence of accessible, affordable grocery stores and food retailers has far-reaching consequences for community well-being. Residents in food deserts often experience higher rates of diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, and face increased challenges in accessing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Limited access to nutritious food can also negatively impact educational outcomes, economic productivity, and overall quality of life. Furthermore, the lack of nearby access to food retailers can contribute to a decline in neighborhood vitality, creating a cycle of disinvestment and hardship. Ultimately, providing

² Data compiled from 2020 Census Geographies with Decennial Census Attributes and 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, joined and analyzed by the Tennessee Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team using block group-level data from Metro Nashville’s organizational data portal.

³ Marketplace. "How Do Grocery Stores Make Money When Their Profit Margins Are So Low?" *Marketplace*, May 13, 2022. <https://www.marketplace.org/2022/05/13/how-do-grocery-stores-make-money-when-their-profit-margins-are-so-low/>.

consistent access to healthy food options fosters a stronger, more resilient community⁴. By prioritizing food access, Nashville can improve public health outcomes, support economic vitality, and cultivate a more equitable environment for all residents.

Vision

Mayor O'Connell envisions a future where all residents have convenient access to fresh, affordable, and culturally relevant food options within their neighborhoods. To achieve this vision, we aim to establish a network of 5-6 community focused grocery stores strategically located throughout the city, prioritizing areas currently designated as food deserts. While the efforts of non-profit organizations are invaluable in providing immediate relief to those experiencing food insecurity, they often face limitations in addressing the root causes of food deserts and ensuring long-term food access. Therefore, we recognize the need to address the underlying economic issues that create and perpetuate food deserts. Metro is committed to leveraging its resources, including the potential use of city-owned land, to facilitate the development of grocery stores. Furthermore, the Mayor's Office is open to exploring various incentive programs to encourage developers and operators to participate in this initiative, creating sustainable and community-focused food access points. These stores are envisioned as community focused initiatives that may involve sourcing directly from local farmers, a food co-op design, or a public-private partnership where a private grocer operates on city-owned land, ensuring sustainable and community-focused food access.

II. Requested Information

Requested Information

Recognizing the urgent need for innovative and sustainable solutions, the Metro Nashville is exploring alternative models for ensuring equitable access to healthy food. One promising approach is the development of a community-focused grocery store, which would prioritize local control, economic empowerment, and community-driven decision-making. This Request for Information (RFI) seeks to gather insights, ideas, and recommendations from qualified organizations and individuals regarding the feasibility, structure, and implementation of city led grocery stores. Metro Nashville is particularly interested in understanding the incentives, financial mechanisms, and policy tools that would be most

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*. Report to Congress, June 2009.

effective in structuring a public-private partnership to support the development of such business, particularly:

- **Innovative Development Models:** Information on successful strategies for developing and operating grocery stores in urban environments, including mixed-use developments, adaptive reuse of existing buildings, and creative financing approaches.
- **Community Engagement Strategies:** Best practices for engaging community members in the planning, development, and operation of such stores, ensuring that they are responsive to local needs and preferences.
- **Incentive Programs for Developers:** Recommendations on the types of incentives (e.g., density bonuses, tax abatements, expedited permitting) that would be most effective in attracting developers to build on city-owned land or in underserved areas.
- **Financial Sustainability Models:** Insights on viable business models for grocery stores, including strategies for managing costs, generating revenue, and attracting investment.
- **Supply Chain and Distribution Networks:** Information on establishing efficient and reliable supply chains, with a focus on sourcing from local farmers and producers.
- **Operational Best Practices:** Recommendations on best practices for operating, including staffing, inventory management, marketing, and community outreach.

Through this initiative, Nashville aims to foster equitable development that enhances affordability, strengthens neighborhoods, and improves access to fresh, healthy food for all residents.

Questions

The [RFI Response Template](#), located at the end of this document, contains the full list of questions. While responses may be submitted in any format you prefer, we strongly encourage you to utilize the [RFI Response Form: Community Focused Grocer Network](#). This template is provided for your convenience and may serve as a helpful guide. All respondents should answer questions in Section 1, then respond to the subsequent section(s) that pertain to your background. For example, an individual with both grocer and nonprofit experience should respond to Sections 1, 2, and 3.

III. Submission Requirements

Submission Format and Timeline

We greatly value your insights and expertise in helping the Metro Nashville address the critical issue of food deserts. We encourage you to share your thoughts and information based on your experience, focusing on the questions and areas where you feel you can make the most valuable contributions to this important initiative. This is not a request for proposal (RFP), and the information gathered through this RFI may or may not precede a formal RFP in the future. Responses to the RFI, or failure to submit a response, will have no impact on the evaluation of responses or selection of a vendor if any subsequent Request for Proposals or Request for Qualifications (or any other solicitation document) is issued by the Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County.

To share your perspective and help build a more food-secure Nashville, please respond through the [RFI Response Form: Community Focused Grocer Network](#) by August 8, 2025.

Communication

Responders may contact Jamari Brown at (615)-862-6000 if they have any questions regarding this RFI. Responders are prohibited from communicating directly with any official or employee regarding this RFI, and no City official, employee or representative is authorized to provide any information or respond to any question or inquiry concerning this RFI other than as indicated in the previous sentence. All responses, and any other written materials, submitted shall become the property of the Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County and may be subject to release under the Tennessee Public Records Act or other applicable public disclosure laws.

RFI Response Template: Metro Nashville – Addressing Food Deserts

Instructions: All respondents should answer questions in Section 1, then respond to the subsequent section(s) that pertain to your background. For example, an individual with both grocer and nonprofit experience should respond to Sections 1, 2, and 3. Please submit all responses to Jamari.brown@nashville.gov.

Respondent Name: _____

Organization: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Section 1: Required for All Respondents

1a. Please provide a brief overview of your organization or entity, including your structure, primary areas of focus, and the communities or markets you typically serve.

1b. Please describe your relevant experience or qualifications related to grocery store or produce-related development, operations, or partnerships.

1c. In your experience, what are the key location requirements for a successful grocery store or food co-op?

1d. How does proximity to transit hubs or corridors impact the success of a grocery store or food co-op?

1e. How do an area's socioeconomic factors influence the viability and sustainability of these operations?

1f. What potential challenges or barriers—such as regulatory, financial, or technical—do you foresee in implementing this model? Please include relevant examples and lessons learned from your prior experience.

1g. Are you aware of any case studies or examples of similar efforts that have worked well in comparable urban environments?

Section 2: Nonprofit Organizations and Community-Based Groups

2a. What types of community engagement strategies have you seen or used to build support for grocery store or co-op projects?

2b. In your experience, what role can nonprofits play in supporting long-term sustainability for stores in food desert areas?

2c. What types of public or private partnerships have been most impactful in your work related to food access or local development?

2d. What metrics does your organization use to measure success of your program?

Section 3: Grocers and Food Operators

3a. What is the ideal lot size for a new store in an urban setting?

3b. What basic infrastructure is essential to launch and sustain a new store (e.g., parking, electricity capacity, roads, etc.)?

3c. Would access to a guaranteed supplier partnership increase your interest in expanding to underserved areas? If so, what type of partnership structure would be most attractive?

3d. To what extent would reduced property taxes or other tax incentives influence your decision to expand? Please describe how such incentives would impact your business model, investment timeline, or location choices.

3e. What sourcing models (e.g., local producers, cooperatives, wholesalers) have been effective for you in underserved areas?

3f. To make this model successful, should we incorporate an online grocery ordering platform with pickup and delivery services? If so, what resources or support would you need to effectively implement and operate such a system?

3g. Are there any other reasons, besides sales/profit, that you think might prevent you from considering opening a grocery store in underserved areas? For example, concerns about safety or challenges with employee recruitment.

Section 4: Developers

4a. In your view, is it feasible to develop multiple grocery sites at once (e.g., 5–6 locations)? If so, what factors must be in place?

4b. If a phased or staggered development approach is more appropriate, what would your recommended timeline look like?

4c. Would the eligibility for mixed-use space—including residential units above a store or retail space in the building—improve the financial feasibility of these projects? If so, what share of those units could be affordably priced while keeping the project viable?

4d. What types of incentives (financial or otherwise) would be most effective in encouraging your involvement in a project of this nature?

Section 5: Agricultural Producers and Local Food Suppliers

5a. How important is local supplier access to the success of urban grocery initiatives?

5b. Would you be open to participating in supplier partnerships with urban grocers? If so, what types of support or commitments would be necessary to make that work?

5c. What challenges or opportunities do you see in establishing reliable sourcing relationships with new stores in underserved areas?

5d. Can you share any innovative or alternative sourcing models you've seen succeed in your industry?

5e. Could expanding the community-supported agriculture (CSA) model complement community-focused grocery initiatives in addressing food deserts? If so, what types of support or commitments would be needed to effectively integrate both approaches?
