Pushing Produce: The New York City Green Carts Initiative

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In 2008, the New York City Council and Mayor Bloomberg signed legislation for Local Law 9, which established 1,000 permits for a new street class of food vendors called Green Carts—mobile fruit and vegetable businesses. Each of the city's five counties (boroughs) was allotted a number of carts that could move freely within areas where the consumption of fruits and vegetables was lowest; these are also neighborhoods where the prevalence of diet related diseases is high. As of May 2012, there were 477 active Green Cart permits, 200 of which reside in underserved areas of the Bronx, 142 in Brooklyn, 91 in Manhattan, and 41 in Queens.

Green Cart permits were intended to create a low-cost and rapid mechanism to get more fruits and vegetables into neighborhoods that need them. The assumption was that with increased supply, there would be increased consumption. Green Cart-zoned areas were selected in neighborhoods where at least 14% of residents stated that they had not eaten any fruits or vegetables the previous day. These are the same neighborhoods that have both a shortage of supermarkets per capita and a heavy presence of corner stores.* Most of these corner stores sell primarily unhealthy processed foods and few, if any, fresh fruits and vegetables. The introduction of Green Carts also created an economic opportunity to start a low-cost micro-enterprise that would provide a much needed service. Since the inception of the Green Carts program, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) has: (1) monitored factors that contribute to Green Cart vendors being successful and (2) assessed the change in overall neighborhood availability of fruits and vegetables in Green Cart neighborhoods.

The primary factors that contribute to Green Carts' success include: setting up in a good location, maintaining an attractive and diverse cart, the vendor speaking the same language as the community residents, having the support of one or several nearby community organizations, and having the ability to accept SNAP benefits. As free market participants, Green Cart vendors set up in locations that they foresee being most profitable; these are often commercial areas with significant foot traffic. While this may result in Green Carts clustering rather than spreading evenly throughout the permitted zones, it increases the likelihood of vendors' being

*Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/supermarket/index.shtml>

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profitable. Additionally, in areas of high population density, clustering may be beneficial to the vendor and the neighborhood residents, as multiple Green Carts may be necessary in order to meet demand.

Through a private/public partnership grant, Green Cart vendors have been offered technical assistance on how to start and promote a business and staff has connected Green Cart vendors with community organizations to help them stimulate demand for produce. With assistance from New York State, 27 vendors now have remote terminals that enable them to accept EBT and this number continues to grow. Several organizations support vendors by hosting instructional workshops on how to start a Green Cart business, providing storage space for carts, and promoting Green Cart purchasing. These opportunities are growing as Green Carts become more established and visible through public and private publicity efforts.

The NYC DOHMH's evaluation of the Green Carts Initiative examines the availability of fruits and vegetables before and after implementation in selected neighborhoods. To control for secular trends, non-Green Cart neighborhoods have been and will continue to be evaluated. Results from the first phase of this evaluation show that from 2008 to 2009, the proportion of food establishments selling both fruits and vegetables tended to increase in Green Cart precincts but not in comparison precincts. When the availability directly attributable to sales by Green Carts was taken out of the analysis, the increased availability persisted in neighborhoods hosting Green Carts. These findings are particularly exciting because the increase in fresh fruit and vegetable availability may be primarily driven by corner stores, suggesting that Green Carts may be increasing overall demand, and encouraging other establishments to sell more produce.

So far, we are pleased to find that the Green Carts may be increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in the areas of the city in greatest need. As Green Cart permits become more visible and widely distributed, we will continue to evaluate their impact (including their effect on consumption), and we expect that this trend will be maintained. We hope other urban environments with low fruit and vegetable availability learn from our experiences and consider adopting a similar initiative.