2019 Buena Vista Grocery Store Feasibility Study

An Assessment of Options to Improve Fresh Food Access in Buena Vista Charter Township
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After Kroger shut its doors to the Buena Vista community in 2016, the Township lost its primary provider of fresh groceries. Today, a lack of access to fresh foods persists, such that the USDA has designated part of the Township a food desert. The USDA broadly defines food deserts as low-income areas in which residents — perhaps due to the distance to the nearest store or lack of transportation — cannot reliably meet their grocery needs.

This report introduces three options to address food insecurity in Buena Vista and confront the Township’s designation as a food desert:

1. Attempt to attract a grocery store to the Township,
2. Leverage nontraditional avenues like mobile grocers or a farmer’s market, and
3. Open a grocery store operated by the Township government.

Each option has advantages and disadvantages. For example, while a major chain grocer would most adequately meet the demands of Buena Vista shoppers, the Township has little control over the siting of a private store. On the other hand, alternatives like farmer’s markets are more within Township control, but such options often rely on philanthropic funding and offer a smaller variety of products than a traditional grocer.

This report offers specific actions the Board of Trustees and local leaders can take to address the dearth of fresh food in the Township, and it suggests avenues to secure external funding for projects related to food insecurity.
### Background

#### Problem Statement

In 2016, Kroger closed its Buena Vista Charter Township (BVCT) location to consolidate operations with a store four miles southeast in Bridgeport. On March 14, employees received notice that Kroger’s BVCT location was set to close. By the end of April, the township lost its only major grocery store.\(^1\) Kroger’s departure limited residents’ access to fresh produce and unprocessed foods. Today, BVCT shoppers rely on Save A Lot and various “dollar store” concepts to stock their cupboards. Community members with access to personal vehicles drive upwards of 30 minutes to Bridgeport’s Kroger or Saginaw’s Meijer.

BVCT’s situation is among the most concerning in the State of Michigan: The U.S. Department of Agriculture considers much of the township a food desert, or a low-income region “vapid of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods … largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers.”\(^2\) The USDA notes that more than 100 households in BVCT do not own personal vehicles, which exacerbates the impact of living in a food desert.\(^3\)

This feasibility study seeks to address BVCT’s limited access to fresh groceries by examining the conditions preventing the reentry of a major grocer into the township and evaluating various options to expand access to healthy food for BVCT residents.

#### Stuck in the Middle: What’s Working Against BVCT?

The BVCT government faces conditions that limit the township’s appeal to grocers and limit the ability of residents to access existing options within and beyond BVCT. This section outlines three issues that perpetuate the township’s status as a food desert: BVCT demographics and population decline, complications related to grocery-store siting, and insufficient public transit.

#### Demographic Trends

As seen in rural areas across Michigan and the U.S., BCVT is characterized by a declining population and a pessimistic economic outlook. Between 2010 and 2017, the township’s population decreased by over 300 residents (3 percent of its 2010 population), and the median

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3 Ibid.
household income dropped even more markedly. As of 2016, MLive reported that BVCT is among the 10 poorest regions in Michigan.4

Through interviews with representatives of large-scale grocery chains, this report finds that the Township’s demographics and economic outlooks are unattractive to a full-service grocer. Stores likely would not refuse to enter the BVCT market merely on the basis of its low median income, but the township’s declining population and low population density deter prospective vendors.

Siting Issues

The township’s low density and population decline may not appeal to grocers, though its location along Interstate 75 could mitigate the impact of adverse demographic factors. Grocers prefer locations along or adjacent to routes that sustain traffic volumes exceeding 20,000 cars per day.5 About 50,000-100,000 cars travel on Route I-75 through BVCT daily.6

While lots immediately off the township’s cloverleaf meet the needs of full-service stores, the land is unavailable for development by grocers. BVCT signed a 2019 deal with Save A Lot that secured an increase in Save A Lot’s fresh produce stock in exchange for a restraint on competing grocery developments within the township’s Town Center District (shown in Figure 1). Based on the site criteria expressed by industry representatives, these lots are likely the most attractive available retail sites in the township.

Two other major lots are unavailable: the vacant high school site and the former Kroger site. The original mandate for this study was to evaluate the feasibility of converting the abandoned school — now owned by Saginaw School District — into a full-service grocery store, but in the duration of this project, the school district expressed its refusal to sell the lot to the Township. Meanwhile, Kroger continues to hold the lease on the vacated lot of its former store along Dixie Highway. The lease will be up for renewal in 2021. In the short term, neither the high school, the former Kroger site, nor any lots within the Town Center District are available for development.

Transportation

BVCT’s status as a food desert is perpetuated not only by the dearth of grocers within the township, but also by a lack of transportation required to access existing distributors. USDA data

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identifies low vehicle ownership as a concern for BVCT; in a township with low density, those
who do not own a personal vehicle are severely disadvantaged. In conversations with BVCT
residents, we found that sidewalk coverage is often inadequate for those forced to travel by foot,
and poor lighting along existing sidewalks risks pedestrian safety. Even if pedestrians find the
streets walkable, the Save A Lot location is accessible by foot for only a limited number of
residents. Figure 2 shows areas within 10-, 20-, and 30-minute walks to Save A Lot. As shown,
households east of I-75 generally cannot access Save A Lot by foot, and many of the 6,000
residents within a 30-minute walk of the store are Saginaw shoppers.

While an alternative to walking or driving, public transit in BVCT adequately serves too few of
the township’s residents. Saginaw Transit Authority Regional Services (STARS) — the
township’s transit provider — covers only the westemmost portion of the township, leaving the
nearly 2,500 residents east of Outer Drive without easy access. While STARS offers a curb-to-
curb “Express” service, the fare is $5.25 per person and is only offered to areas within a one-mile
radius of its fixed routes; it effectively excludes the township’s most rural and low-income
residents. STARS Express also imposes a limit of four grocery bags per passenger.7

Current conditions drastically limit the ability of residents without personal vehicles to visit the
only grocer in BVCT, with those east of I-75 most impacted.

Methodology

We assessed community needs by facilitating a town hall meeting with approximately 30 residents (a summary and survey responses are available in the appendix of this report). We identified potential solutions by interviewing grocers, industry professionals, and residential stakeholders, as well as by evaluating the strategies of similar municipalities fighting food insecurity. Municipal interviews and analyses of BVCT’s zoning maps and population density illuminated the limits of these solutions.

In October 2019, residents of BVCT convened to discuss the impacts of living in a food desert. Residents cited an array of issues, from long travel times to inadequate store selections to poor public transit.
Results: Options Analysis

Option No. 1: Recruit a Grocery Store

This option is largely out of the Township’s control. Food retail is a low-margin, high-volume industry, and no company invests in real estate or a labor force without certainty of breaking even. Public companies generally require a more significant return on investment. To meet financial goals, grocery chains seek real estate that meets specific geographic and demographic criteria. Some of the criteria do not describe BVCT, but the Township can take steps to adapt its characteristics or strategically improve sites to increase appeal.

Full-Service Super Store

According to an interview with a large regional grocer, conducted on the condition of confidentiality, real estate decisions are influenced by:

- **Population**: Population density is a decisive factor. Large stores require more prospective shoppers to justify community investments, although this factor is mitigated in sparsely populated regions and uncompetitive environments, such as isolated rural towns. “Generally speaking, it takes 15,000 people in one market with no major competition for a standard size grocer to be interested in an area,” John Sechser, senior vice president at Transwestern, told Food Dive.⁸

- **Trade proximity**: In counties more rural than Saginaw, retail tends to cluster in the county seat, where residents are drawn for routine transactions and political activities. The “trade area” of interest can extend 10 to 15 miles, depending on whether another populated town is in proximity to the county seat. Superstores do not necessarily define trade boundaries by radius but instead draw irregular boundaries dependent on census tracts, competitors and other barriers to business development. Highways are seen as barriers, as customers avoid routes with interchanges. Rural towns typically have broader trade boundaries.

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- **Real estate**: The model grocer requires 20 acres of real estate preferably near the city center. These sites are ideally accessible by primary roads — typically at the crossroads of two main streets, but not in a downtown.

- **Traffic**: Large grocers seek sites with traffic of about 20,000 cars per day. It would be reasonable to assume similar requirements for peers in the large, regional grocery chain segment, although some competitors consider additional factors. Some weigh visibility and accessibility from nearby roads and highways; accessibility of public transportation; accessibility of delivery trucks; and recent or expected residential growth. Population demographics are often considered but are not always dispositive. The interviewed superstore serves all socioeconomic classes and does not consider median income when examining potential sites. This consideration varies greatly from retailer to retailer. Some, particularly specialty retailers, select sites consistent with their standard consumer lifestyle profile. They consider median age, educational attainment, employment, income levels, home values, motor vehicle ownership rates, the number and type of households or housing units, marital status and ethnicity.

Local government incentives are generally omitted from consideration. The interviewed grocery chain evaluates tax breaks and subsidies on a case-by-case basis but does not actively seek public assistance. It attempts all development projects without public assistance.

BVCT lacks the requisite population density and real estate proximity to trade centers. It is highly unlikely to entice a full-service grocer.

**Super Store Spinoffs**

Some superstores launch smaller grocery models, such as Meijer’s Bridge Street Market or Walmart’s Corner Store. These serve only high-density populations in walkable urban centers.

BVCT lacks the requisite population density and envisioned urban center. It is highly unlikely to entice a corner store.

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Limited Grocery Stores

According to the Aldi website and an interview with the store’s Michigan real estate director, a limited grocer takes the following into account when considering new retail venues:

- **Population:** Aldi requires a “dense trade area population within 3 miles.”\(^{11}\) Population includes residents and consistent visitors drawn for business and tourism. Expressway exits and commercial centers increase density. Targets are not strictly defined.

- **Trade proximity:** Aldi prefers to be near competitors in “community and regional shopping districts with convenient access to [the] population.”\(^{12}\)

- **Real estate:** The proposed site must be zoned for grocery use and consist of at least 2.5 acres for purchase. Aldi seeks to construct facilities occupying about 22,000 square feet — including at least 103 feet of frontage — and supporting at least 95 parking spaces.

- **Traffic:** Aldi prefers property near a signalized, full-access intersection and requires a traffic count exceeding 20,000 vehicles per day.

Income is not a core consideration, although “middle-market” shoppers — those who buy neither the most expensive nor the least expensive items in a given category — are targeted. Aldi makes no exceptions for food deserts or charitable markets. Notably, it has never qualified for a tax break in Michigan and may be enticed by unusual incentives.

It would be reasonable to assume comparable site requirements for similarly-sized stores — with a few exceptions. Some limited stores are particular about the demographics served by nearby businesses and the extent to which they are compatible with their grocery consumer profile.\(^{13}\) For example, a family store may be disinclined to settle next to a marijuana dispensary.

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**Given BVCT’s low median income, grocers may assume that residents are low-market consumers rather than middle-market consumers. This may deter grocer entry in BVCT.**

**Additionally, BVCT lacks real estate near established grocers or other consumer businesses. However, the flexible definition of “trade area” may work in the Township’s favor. Limited grocery stores may appreciate the dense traffic running through BVCT related to Nexteer operations and I-75.**

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**Independent Grocers**

Independent grocers have more flexibility on stocking products. They can carry less inventory than a superstore and tailor it to reflect community needs and desires. For these reasons, independent grocers are more suitable for a small community like BVCT. They may also be

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\(^{11}\) corporate.aldi.us/en/real-estate/real-estate-opportunities.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

easier to attract, as they experience fewer bureaucratic barriers than do national chains. However, the challenges of attracting an independent grocer are similar to those associated with superstore chains. For example, the Township would need to prove itself to be a profitable market. Other hindrances include:

- **Community leverage:** Beyond offering tax breaks, BVCT has little agency to appeal to a grocer.
- **Dearth of services:** While an independent grocer would have a larger inventory than alternatives detailed in Option 2, it would likely struggle to meet the needs of the community. Independent grocers often lack pharmacies or in-store bakeries, so some customers would likely opt to drive to more distant superstore grocers to access these amenities.
- **Siting:** Since the Town Center Plaza is unavailable for development, prospective grocers have limited site options, most of which are not conducive to sustainable performance.

A small grocer would increase access to fresh foods, but BVCT has limited leverage to attract one. Enticing an independent grocer, while more feasible than recruiting a full-service chain, is unrealistic given the Township’s limited market appeal.

**Comprehensive Option Assessment**

Small towns present limited returns on investment and consequently “tend to not come out as high on the equation” for supermarkets. That being said, some superstores invest in markets purely because “they believe in them.” These markets include food deserts like BVCT. However, prospective stores must still demonstrate potential to operate on independent financial merits. Small communities like BVCT are often advised to appeal to smaller grocers, which can sustain themselves on smaller populations.

**Option No. 2: Alternatives to Traditional Grocers**

The options in this section are more within BVCT’s control. There are several mechanisms and models that the Township could pursue to secure a fresh food source, and BVCT is conveniently located for such options due to its proximity to agricultural producers. However, these alternatives to a full-service grocer present challenges in terms of consistent access, variety, and price.

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15 Ibid.
Farmer’s Markets

Many farmer’s markets are run as part of the local government and are typically operated by municipal parks departments. Funding is sustained through park department revenue, tax revenue, market revenue, and grant funding. Farmer’s markets are attractive to consumers because they generally accept SNAP and WIC benefits. There are several grant-funded programs available to townships to increase these benefits.

Note that some farmer’s markets are not government-operated but instead function as nonprofit organizations. They are often grant-funded or sustain themselves on vendor stall rentals.

Limitations of this solution and barriers to starting a farmer’s market include:

- **Regulatory red tape:** All farmer’s markets must be licensed by the state of Michigan through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD). Vendors have additional licensing requirements, although those selling unprocessed goods can waive these requirements.
- **Low-income accessibility:** For a farmer’s market or vendor to accept SNAP and WIC benefits, it must apply through the USDA. This is a critical step for BVCT; 20 percent of households in Saginaw County receive benefits, and these numbers are likely higher in BVCT given its relatively low median income. Without benefits, the market prices may be prohibitive for local buyers.
- **Land availability:** Farmer’s markets are often located in areas with potential for high foot traffic. The Town Center parking lot, which is owned by the Township, is an ideal location. It is unclear whether BVCT’s non-compete agreement with Save A Lot would preclude the establishment of a farmer’s market in this location. Alternative sites may not provide as much exposure to consumers.
- **Funding:** The Township could take out a loan, approve a millage, or apply for grants to launch a farmer’s market. These options are time consuming, and success is not guaranteed.
- **Scheduling difficulties:** Farmer’s markets are not permanent structures and do not operate during all standard business hours. Setting a weekly schedule amenable to residents would be critical to the market’s success. Additionally, most farmer’s markets close in the winter when the growing season ends. Market closure would impede local access to fresh food for multiple months out of the year.

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Food Hub

According to the USDA Agricultural Marketing Services, a food hub is an entity “that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and/or marketing of source-identified food products from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.”¹⁷

Independent food hubs have found little success in rural communities; their products are costly, so demand within the already-small consumer base is low. However, some hubs have thrived by attaching themselves to local grocery stores. These stores operate effective hubs by leveraging existing storage infrastructure, experienced personnel, delivery systems, broader market access via distributors, and a built-in sales channels (i.e., they can buy directly from the hub).

Several tools exist to help rural grocers add food hubs to their existing operations, including a study and Store-Based Food Hub Preliminary Assessment Widget created by New Venture Advisors. These tools could be used to assess whether a grocer like Save A Lot could incorporate a food hub into its model. The integrated food hub model could also be adopted if an independent grocer set up shop in BVCT.

Limitations of this solution and barriers to the integrated food hub model include:

- **Lack of independent grocer**: Integrated food hubs are ideally paired with independent grocers. As no such grocers exist in BVCT and the barriers to attracting one are steep, this model cannot be implemented to its fullest potential.

- **Difficulty pairing with big chains**: All existing research focuses on integrating food hubs into independent grocers. The challenges of integrating hubs into larger chains are unknown. Installing a food hub in Save A Lot, for example, will likely be more difficult due to the interference of corporate bureaucracy.

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Pairing a food hub with an existing grocer would sufficiently increase fresh food access in BVCT, but challenges arise in working with chains like Save A Lot, whose corporate structures could clash with the new model. Pairing a food hub with an independent grocer would be most desirable, but the Township currently has no such stores.

Mobile Grocery Store

Mobile grocery stores are limited grocers housed in vehicles that make scheduled stops in areas lacking access to a traditional grocer. They can take on a variety of models similar to those of a full-service grocer or farmer’s market. Some models are operated by nonprofits, such as the YMCA Veggie Van serving Grand Rapids and Muskegon. Others, such as Rollin’ Grocer in Kansas City, Missouri, run as for-profit businesses focused on serving under-resourced communities. In some cases, mobile grocery stores can better serve food deserts than their traditional counterparts. They offer reliable food access to residents with unreliable transportation. This can be especially useful in communities lacking reliable public transit and can benefit less-mobile senior residents.

Limitations to this solution and barriers to establishing a mobile grocery store include:

- **Regulatory red tape:** Zoning ordinances may need to be amended to allow the operation of a mobile grocer.  
- **Start-up capital:** Despite being less expensive to open than a traditional grocery store, most operations require significant start-up grant funding. Additionally, mobile grocers serving low-income populations cannot pass costs on to their customers without losing demand. Nonprofit operations must have alternative funding plans in place in case grant funding disappears.
- **Competition:** Customers who are unsatisfied with the selection available at a mobile grocer will likely continue to frequent full-service grocers near BVCT. This will reduce the mobile grocer’s customer base and limit its profitability.

In a low-density township like BVCT, mobile grocers can effectively serve customers without access to personal vehicles or public transportation and older populations. However, serving a market of over 8,000 consumers spread across 36 square miles would likely be unprofitable, particularly if few customers enroll in the service.

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https://ecodistricts.org/information-exchange/mobile-grocery-store-units/.
Comprehensive Option Assessment

BVCT holds considerable power over the launch of a farmer’s market, while a mobile grocer can be sustained with adequate start-up and philanthropic funding. As such, these alternative grocery models appear relatively feasible for the Township. However, none of the options in this section offer the variety or consistency of a traditional grocer and consequently create a tradeoff between the Township’s agency over solving food access and the utility of the solution.

Option No. 3: Township-operated Store

Townships can bypass the involvement of external stakeholders by opening their own grocery stores. This option has the advantage of being within the community’s control and providing a variety of fresh food to residents. Municipal grocery stores have been launched with some success in several small, rural municipalities struggling with food insecurity.20,21 These stores are owned and operated by the local government, and the staff are government employees. Since the store is not beholden to “shareholders” in the traditional sense, it does not have to operate at a profit and can instead operate with the goal of sustaining itself and paying back any startup costs.

Limitations to this solution and barriers to creating a township-owned store include:

- **Startup costs:** The Township would have to raise startup revenue through a millage or bond, apply for grant funding, or take out a loan. These options are time consuming, and success is not guaranteed.
- **Financial risk:** Dedicating resources to a venture that could fail due to mismanagement or underuse could place considerable financial strain on BVCT.
- **Need for industry experience:** A government-run store would require staff. Operating such a venture is likely beyond the capacity of standard township employees, so hiring management with food-service experience is crucial.
- **Land availability:** The Township would have to purchase or lease land for the brick-and-mortar site. However, it could leverage existing infrastructure and municipally owned lots at the community center.

Comprehensive Option Assessment

The advantages of a grocery store owned and operated by the Township are clear: BVCT would have control over this solution and residents would have access to more fresh food. The


challenges, however, are numerous: The Township would have to be willing to accept a high level of financial risk in this venture, a project attempted only several times nationally with little research affirming the option as a viable long-term fix.

**Figure 4:** This visualization summarizes this section by plotting the options along two axes: usefulness and feasibility. With each solution, there is often a tradeoff. Brick-and-mortar grocery stores, for example, would most adequately meet the needs of the community, but the community has little leverage over the decision-making process of private grocers. Inversely, mobile grocers and farmer’s markets are potentially more controllable by the Township, though neither is as useful as a chain grocer.

Interestingly, a government-owned grocery store offers realism and upside; the Township can remove the decision-making process from the private sector and supply grocer-like services to its residents. However, very few communities have experimented with this option, so predicting the success of the township-run store is difficult.
Many of the factors limiting the feasibility of establishing a full-service grocer in BVCT are due to the actions of external parties beyond the Township’s control. However, the Township is not powerless in shaping the future of healthy, affordable food access in the community. From altering zoning codes to working with community-based partners to secure grant funding for food initiatives, BVCT can take several proactive measures to advance its food-access goals.

What follows is a review of the various levers BVCT has at its disposal to promote quality food retail operations as well as a summary of major grant opportunities to assist with financing these enterprises. These are by no means comprehensive lists — rather, they serve to illustrate how the Township can leverage institutional tools to reduce the effects of food scarcity on residents.

**Township Leverage**

One of BVCT’s greatest assets is its ability to control land and building use and business licensing. Though BVCT cannot compel a food retailer to start up business within its borders, it can revise its zoning code and licensing processes to assist healthy, quality enterprises in beginning operations. Revisions can also be made to discourage low-quality food vendors like dollar stores from entering and proliferating in the BVCT market.

- **Zoning Relief:** The non-compete agreement with Save A Lot limits the amount of available land currently zoned for food distribution. Many of the remaining zoning-compliant parcels are in areas typically unattractive to prospective grocers. Restrictive factors include distance from major thoroughfares and limited parking capacity (see pages 7-10 for a full list). Understanding the qualities of an ideal setting for a grocer gives BVCT leverage when considering potential changes to the zoning code.

  The Township can pursue these changes in a variety of ways. A less intensive route is to offer case-by-case zoning relief for prospective vendors who have indicated interest in operating in an area not yet zoned for retail use. In this case, the Township can offer a one-time, conditional allowance to facilitate quality food sales. A case-by-case approach for food or grocery retailers would likely see limited use. It requires an interested retailer to engage with the Township without any guarantees of relief. This is unlikely, as the business interest in entering the BVCT market is low. As such, while there is a low likelihood that this relief would be abused, there is also a limited probability that prospective food vendors would expend resources on an uncertain, drawn-out zoning relief process in a sparsely populated market.

  A more effective approach to zoning constraints is a revision of BVCT’s zoning map. Keeping in mind the factors that prospective retailers use to scout new locations, the
Township can highlight certain areas outside of the Town Center or existing B-1 Commercial: Local Business Districts that meet the size and location preferences for food vendors and mark them for conversion. BVCT can then follow public protocol to finalize such alterations. This approach institutes lasting changes to the Township’s zoning layout and ensures that the land is usable before it is considered by a prospective food retailer, thereby preempting a lengthy appeals process.

- **Zoning and Licensing Restrictions:** BVCT is experiencing a phenomenon familiar to rural food-desert communities throughout the country: an influx of “dollar store” style chains in lieu of full-service grocers. As of this writing, two such stores lie within Township limits and operate less than a block apart. Two additional Dollar General chains are slated to open by 2021.

The effects of these stores entering the BVCT market are pervasive. On one hand, they offer residents modest provisions at competitive prices. On the other, the products have limited nutritional value; many are processed, and few dollar stores sell fresh fruits or vegetables. While the food in these stores is offered in single-serving sizes at inexpensive price points, BVCT residents ultimately pay more per ounce for nutritionally-lacking food than what they would pay at a traditional supermarket.

The economic impacts of the proliferation of dollar stores extend to the broader BVCT community. On average, dollar stores employ fewer workers at lower wages than competing grocers do. The U.S. Economic Census reports that chains such as Dollar General employ nine workers compared to the 14 employed by an average local grocer. While an influx of new dollar stores offers the possibility of modest job growth in a community lacking a full-service grocer, the low prices for these stores crowd out full-service and higher-wage grocers from entering the BVCT market. Their presence meets short-term community demands while limiting prospects for long-term growth.

Through its control over land use, BVCT can limit — or even prohibit — dollar stores from joining the Township’s business community. BVCT has a suite of options to combat this proliferation, many of which have already been implemented by peer communities experiencing a similar scarcity of nutritious food. Such options include:

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**Figure 5:** Dollar stores dominate markets like BVCT. Two of the largest national chains – Dollar Tree and Dollar General – boast 16 locations in Saginaw County alone.
Adopting a “formula business” ordinance: Such an ordinance can prohibit non-distinctive dollar store chains; require chains to meet specific conditions in order to operate, such as offering specific types of food or meeting pre-designated economic impact criteria; or cap the number of chains entering the community. This option grants BVCT flexibility in determining how to regulate the entry of low-quality food vendors and allows the community to weigh the benefits and tradeoffs of hard caps, prohibitions, or conditional, case-by-case allowances. While some large cities like San Francisco have made use of these ordinances, governments in smaller, rural areas have also successfully limited formula businesses. In 2006, the 2,000-person town of McCall, Idaho, enacted an ordinance that capped the number of such establishments at 10 percent of the town’s total of “like businesses.”

Cementing a dispersal policy in the Township’s Zoning Ordinance: BVCT could institute a township- or zoning district-wide dispersal policy to codify distance restrictions between dollar store enterprises. A common provision adopted by other food desert communities is a one-mile radius from existing stores to ensure there is no concentration of low-quality food vendors.

These are just a few examples of modest tweaks BVCT can make to shape the landscape of quality food access. These options do not ensure that alternative healthy food vendors will enter the BVCT market, but they demonstrate that the community holds some leverage over what types of enterprises can — and should — sell food to the Township’s residents.

Grants/Opportunities for External Assistance

In addition to the direct levers of influence outlined above, BVCT is eligible for several grants and strategy assistance opportunities to finance or encourage the development of food vendors. Many of these opportunities specifically target USDA-defined food deserts. While the Township can secure some grants directly, it must partner with a local Community Action or Community Development Corporation to receive others. Eligible projects include financing grocers seeking to expand into low-income communities; pursuing broad community development; and expanding access to healthy, locally sourced foods. The sources of grants include the U.S. federal government, the State of Michigan, and national nonprofit entities working on local initiatives in Michigan.

Federal Funding and Consulting Opportunities

- Department of Health and Human Services: Community Economic Development (CED) Grants: The CED program awards competitive grants to Community Development

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23 “Commercial Development Guide: City of McCall/McCall Impact Area.” City of McCall Community Development. evogov.s3.amazonaws.com/141/media/109138.pdf.
Corporations, including local faith-based organizations, to fund projects that address the economic needs of low-income residents. Eligible projects inspire greater self-sufficiency in low-income communities. In line with the Department’s mission to improve access to healthy food options, eligible uses for the funds include financing grocery stores, farmer’s markets, or other nutritious and affordable vendors. These funds have been used to mitigate rural food deserts in communities like BVCT. In 2017, the Department awarded $780,000 to Stafford County Economic Development to acquire and develop a 14,000-square-foot supermarket in Saint John, Kansas — a 1,200-resident town. The project is slated for completion in fall 2020 and is expected to generate 31 jobs.

- **USDA Grants:** The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (also known as the 2018 Farm Bill) reauthorized and expanded the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a federal program with the express goal of bringing healthy food retailers to underserved communities across the country. Since 2014, the HFFI has invested over $125 million in healthy food accessibility. The USDA offers grants to public and private entities for projects that increase access for low-income communities while supporting local food production efforts. The 2018 Farm Bill extended the types of projects eligible for HFFI funding to mobile food markets, food hubs, food business incubators, and direct-to-consumer enterprises in addition to traditional grocery stores and farmer’s markets.

- **HUD State Community Development Block Grants (CDBG):** While the CDBG program is not typically associated with increasing healthy food access, these HUD-sponsored block grants offer flexibility for areas like BVCT to meet unique development needs. The goal of these grants is to spur community job growth via the expansion and/or retention of local businesses. Chapter 8, Section 108 of the CDBG program guide spells out the specific qualifications for eligible projects: namely, funding economic activities that meet the Department’s national objective for benefitting neighborhoods with predominantly low- to moderate-income residents. Under these criteria, projects for a local grocery retailer or community-run food hub in BVCT could be eligible for CDBG funding.

- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP):** This resource does not provide monetary assistance. Rather, LFLP is a robust toolkit to help communities map out long-term action plans to engage local stakeholders and prioritize concrete, achievable goals related to food access. Past partner communities have used this planning assistance to meet a variety of food-related goals, including starting business incubators for local entrepreneurs, establishing year-round farmer’s markets, creating community-run kitchens and food hubs, creating local cooperative grocery stores, and addressing transportation needs to make it easier for residents to access quality food.

Planning assistance from the EPA is available via an application process, but the toolkit and corresponding framework for instigating community and stakeholder engagement is freely available.\textsuperscript{26} The next round of applications for direct planning assistance opens in 2020. BVCT could wait to apply, or it could use the toolkit as a model to institute its own action plan for bringing healthy, quality food to the community.

\textit{State-Based Funding Opportunities}

- **Michigan Good Food Fund:** The Michigan Good Food Fund is a $30 million public-private partnership loan fund financing enterprises seeking to deliver quality, affordable, and healthy food to underserved communities. Disbursements and assistance are granted to applicants committed to increasing healthy food access and driving local economic development. The Fund targets enterprises and entrepreneurs who may not generally qualify for traditional bank support. It also focuses on more than food retail services. Projects represent all portions of Michigan’s food value chain, including farming and production, processing, distribution, and sales. For qualifying entrepreneurs or prospective grocery retailers, available capital ranges from $5,000 to $6 million.\textsuperscript{27,28}

- **Michigan Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Grants:** Michigan LISC offers limited grant opportunities to local organizations aiming to develop retail space or otherwise revitalize the community. Over the past three decades, LISC’s Flint branch has equipped community organizations with over $35 million for program-building activities and over $4.5 million for community development projects. Past awardees include Community Development Corporations, nonprofit developers, and advocacy groups.

While millions of dollars’ worth of grant funding are available yearly to stem BVCT’s food-access issues, the Township should not pursue these opportunities in isolation. Grant applications are highly competitive, and the revenue sources are unpredictable. The Township should also examine the tradeoffs between dedicating bandwidth to these applications or allocating time to other community needs. The opportunity costs may be steep. However, BVCT should consider the success of similar communities in accessing these funds and understand the real potential to provide fresh and healthy food to its residents.

Nearly 30 residents joined our team at the Buena Vista Community Center in October to discuss the food issues facing the township and brainstorm solutions. The following summary details the large-group conversation and comments made during small-group sessions.

**Problems:** *What issues around food access do you see in your community?*

**There are too few available options.**
- BVCT is served by too many Dollar Stores and liquor stores. Residents do not want food from such retailers because the selection is neither fresh nor nutritious.
- Save A Lot is a “market,” not a store. It lacks quality, quantity and variety — specifically in fresh meat and produce — compared to grocers on the west side.
- The township lacks a bulk-food vendor (e.g. Sam’s Club), so residents must shop to sustain themselves for short periods and return to the grocer frequently to restock.
- The Bridgeport Kroger receives limited quantity shipments and is always picked over.

**Subsistence gardening is difficult.**
- Residents lack gardening knowledge to grow their own produce.

**Existing grocers are too distant.**
- Urban residents drive 20 minutes to grocers in Saginaw, and rural residents travel 30 minutes to grocers in Frankenmuth.

**Transportation limits access to existing stores.**
- Many seniors lack personal vehicles and cannot access better stores outside of BVCT. Seniors at the retirement community rely only on the Commission on Aging, which provides grocery transit only on Wednesdays.
- Saginaw Transportation Authority Regional Services covers only 1.5 miles of BVCT. The Express STARS services imposes grocery bag limits.
- Public transportation — particularly Express STARS — “costs an arm and a leg” for low-income or fixed-income residents.
- No sidewalk connects Save A Lot to nearby apartment complexes. Other sidewalks leading to Save A Lot are poorly lit and poorly maintained in the winter months.

**Fresh food prices are inaccessible.**
- The Saginaw farmer’s market and Jack’s Fruit & Meat Market are prohibitively expensive.

Pedestrian routes are unsafe.
- Low lighting outside of Save A Lot makes residents feel unsafe to visit after dark.

Proposed Solutions/Resources: What are some possible solutions to these problems, and what resources exist in the community to make these solutions happen?

Sponsor municipal food distribution.
BVCT already has a system in place to serve hot meals to seniors at the community center. The infrastructure can be scaled to sell more residents fresh food.

Operate a BVCT farmer’s market.
The market could run on Tuesdays and Thursdays to complement Saginaw’s market open Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Market the old K-Mart land or expressway off-ramp lots to a grocer.
The Downtown Development Authority and Saginaw County can provide resources to assist with the grocer pitch. Advise potential tenants that the region’s industrial businesses and expressway travelers have high demand for groceries.

Expands the bus route.
STARS can add stops closer to senior homes or apartment complexes. Raise millages to support the expansion.

Apply for nonprofit aid.
Some models support communities with mobile stores that sell fresh produce.

Improve constituent communication channels.
Citizens do not know who to contact to get information or express their needs. Run informational campaigns or market existing lines of contact.

See corresponding spreadsheet for aggregated survey responses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Grocer 1</th>
<th>Primary Grocer 2</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Time (in minutes) to grocery store</th>
<th>How satisfied are you with your current shopping situation</th>
<th>Factor influencing where you choose to shop</th>
<th>What would need to change to shop in BVCT?</th>
<th>Additional Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Value &amp; variety of produce</td>
<td>I would like to have a grocery store near my job so I could go after work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Looking for fresh food</td>
<td>Open a big store with variety of items</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Safety, convenience, professional service</td>
<td></td>
<td>See Factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kessel Food Mkt.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Cost - although don’t shop @ Walmart (non-union)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save-a-lot</td>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Somewhat Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>New store where Kroger was located</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Value + Choice</td>
<td>Put a store in BV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Quality of the merchandise</td>
<td>Build a big-ticket store in BV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam's</td>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Closer + good quality</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>Choices</td>
<td>Bigger Chain</td>
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<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Fresh Food</td>
<td>Have a better market that would be closer</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>A local store + more choices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Grocery store closer to my home</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Prices</td>
<td>Grocery store closer to my home and community</td>
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<td>Kroger</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>Prices and selection</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>Kroger</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Somewhat Satisfied</td>
<td>Have more items</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Car</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Somewhat Satisfied</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Getting the items I need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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