

## Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Rally Against Lack of Fresh Food Access

By Aryonna Willoughby, May 16, 2019, The Western Front

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Birchwood Food Desert Fighters stand outside former Albertsons grocery store three years after its closing in protest. // Photo by Aryonna Willoughby

Protesters rallied in front of the Birchwood neighborhood's former Albertsons grocery store to mark the third anniversary of its closure and to protest the company's policies on Tuesday, May 7.

The former Albertsons, located at 1650 Birchwood Ave., closed in May of 2016, leaving the surrounding community without access to fresh food.

Since the closing, the Birchwood neighborhood has become a “food desert,” defined by the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention as, “an area that lacks access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up a full and healthy diet,” according to a memo sent in November 2018 from Council member April Barker to city council.

Most of the protesters’ contempt is not directed toward the closure of the grocery store, but the fact that upon selling the lot to GGD Oakdale LLC, a California-based real estate development firm in March of 2018, a new specific deed was created by Albertsons. The deed prohibits the space from being used as a grocery store for up to 20 years, according to Tina McKim, a member of the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters.

The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters is a grassroots organization whose goal is to make healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food accessible to residents of Birchwood, according to Alex McIntyre, a Birchwood Food Desert Fighter.

“This is ground zero for Bellingham to know what is going on,” Tina McKim, said at the beginning of the rally.

Behind McKim, others stood together with signs displaying messages demanding the end of food deserts and proclaiming food access as a right.

At one point during the rally, the protesters held up empty plates. The plates symbolized what the neighborhood is missing due to the lack of a grocery store, said McIntyre.

Use restrictions such as the agreement used by Albertsons are typically used as a tool by grocery stores to keep future businesses from competing with already existing branches or subsidiaries in the surrounding area, according to the November memo.

Albertsons has no other Bellingham locations. However, they do own Haggen Food & Pharmacy, and Safeway, both of which are located throughout the city.

Although use restrictions themselves aren’t uncommon, the duration of the one that Albertsons has used has left many community members outraged, yet they continue to be optimistic.

“Hopefully, eventually after enough of these events and getting the word out, we’ll hit some kind of critical mass,” Carter Fuehr, a Birchwood resident and Birchwood Food Desert Fighter, said in regard to rallying.

The lack of nearby food accessibility is difficult for residents, especially those who don’t have reliable transportation. Using the transit system can be a lengthy process and isn’t always practical for individuals looking to complete heavier shopping. The Whatcom Transportation Authority only allows each passenger to bring two bags onto the bus, according to McKim.

“If you drive by the food bank line on the days that it’s open, the line goes around the block and I know that there are people in Birchwood who are in that line,” McKim said. “They get stuff for themselves or bring stuff back for other people who can’t get out of the neighborhood.”

Although the organization is mainly concerned with food accessibility, they also recognize the other effects the Albertsons closure has had on the community.

“We thought it was important to occupy this space. Something that people don’t talk about enough with this is that the Albertsons used to be a big space where people had social interactions,” McKim said.

Mid-way through the rally, the attendees did just that. They had one huge picnic, eating food that each of them had brought, and enjoying the company of each other while sitting on plastic cloths.

“We’re bringing community [and food] back to this space, and we hope that is a feeling that will grow,” McKim said. “[We’re hoping that] people will enjoy and remember it and remember that it’s something that every community deserves.”

Afterward, the group packed up and migrated over to the intersection of Birchwood and Northwest Ave to continue picketing for their cause.

The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters have pickets planned for Saturday, May 18, at the Fairhaven Haggan Food & Pharmacy from 12-2 p.m. and May 25 at Barkley Village Haggan Food & Pharmacy at the same time.