

BRINGING WATER TO THE BIRCHWOOD DESERT

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Eight-year-old Bijou Darrow yells passionately at the empty lot where the Birchwood Albertsons used to stand. // Photo by Colton Redtfeldt

Michael Powell pushed his wife Sherry Powell in a wheelchair across a mostly-empty parking lot in the Birchwood neighborhood. Behind them, the remains of a boarded-up building rose into the sky. On the building's facade was the outline of what used to say "Albertsons."

Just over two years ago, the grocery store in the Park Manor Shopping Center was frequented by people from the Birchwood neighborhood who regularly shopped there. Now closed, residents like Michael and Sherry Powell said they have struggled to find fresh, healthy, affordable food near their home.

"Albertsons is well-missed here," Michael said. "There should be a major grocery store in this 'hood."

He said without the Albertsons, many Birchwood residents are forced to commute all the way to Haggen on Meridian Street or Fred Meyer on Lakeway Drive.

The lack of a nearby grocery store has turned Birchwood into a near "food desert."

A food desert is defined as a low-income urban area in which residents are a mile or more away from a supermarket, according to an article by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

Technically, Birchwood isn't a food desert. The former Albertsons building is about 0.7 miles away from the next nearest grocery store, a Haggen on Meridian.

But Birchwood residents say even though their neighborhood doesn't meet the federal definition to qualify as a "food desert," doesn't mean that there isn't a problem. The distance is still problematic for many people in the Birchwood area.

Getting food in Birchwood is especially challenging for residents who either don't have access to a personal vehicle, cannot spare time to make a lengthy commute to buy healthier foods, persons with disabilities, elderly folks and families with young children.

These people are forced to walk or use public transportation.

"We have to get on a bus to Fred Meyer if we want anything decent and since I use a walker, I can't walk that far," Sherry said. "So [my husband's] gotta push me in my wheelchair. It's inconvenient."

A 2017 study found that 9 percent of Birchwood households don't have a vehicle. Additionally, for Birchwood residents who don't drive, like the elderly, transportation becomes a constant issue.

Betty Ross lives at Birchwood Manor, a retirement home in the neighborhood. She said people in her community, particularly the elderly, have had trouble getting food since the closure.

For people who have trouble with mobility, the Whatcom Transit Authority offers a paratransit service. Riders can book paratransit rides for any type of trip, according to the WTA's website.

However, the service isn't ideal, according to Ross. She said the trips are often tedious and take a long time.

"By the time they go back and get you, if you had ice cream or milk, it wouldn't be good," Ross said.

Ross said that the community could benefit from a small store that provides basic necessities, like bread, eggs and milk.

According to the 2017 Enterprise Opportunity 360 study done by Enterprise Opportunity Partners, a national nonprofit organization, 49 percent of residences in Birchwood are classified as low-income and severely cost-burdened.

A residence is considered cost-burdened when they spend 50 percent or more of their income on housing and "may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care," according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The study found that the median household income is \$37,569 per year, compared to the regional average of \$53,145.

Marchelle Foglesong, who lives in Birchwood and takes care of her son who has special needs, was at the rally. She said she moved to her current residence because it was close to public transportation and healthy food options.

However, she said since the closure, she's had trouble getting food while also caring for her son.

“With him being handicapped I have a hard time getting him out to go to the stores with me,” Foglesong said. “I either have to leave him alone or bring him out with me and with his mental illness it’s challenging. Before, I could just come over here and get some fresh fruits and vegetables.”

The effects of the closure radiate outside Birchwood too. The nearby Lummi Tribe has also been impacted by the lack of access to healthy food options in the area.

Tribal member Sheila LinFimble Fame Elvron Fair Sindica said many people in the Lummi Nation shopped at the Birchwood Albertsons.

“A lot of the Lummi Nation depended on Albertsons because it was an easy stop on the bus line and it had very reasonable prices,” Sindica said. “It’s very difficult for them to shop at other places because it’s way out of the way for them.”

Many people in the community have been worried about what is going to happen next. There has also been widespread doubt that the city will do anything about the issue. Because of this, local groups have sprung up to help address the issue.

Now, just over two years have passed since the grocery store closed its doors on May 7, 2016. Members of the neighborhood and greater community gathered to share their concerns and voice their anger, commemorating the date.

The rally was organized by the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters, a group of “neighbors and allies working to address the food desert,” according to their Facebook page.

The group holds periodic community meetings and protests, including a vigil every other Thursday at the former Albertsons lot. In addition, they host a community gathering every third Wednesday of the month at the Faith Lutheran Church on McLeod Road to discuss possible steps forward.

Tina McKim is a member of the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters.

“This isn’t just about a grocery store,” McKim said during a vigil on April 17. “It’s about a grocery store in a poor neighborhood. It’s about a grocery store in a diverse neighborhood. It’s about farm workers who grow food all day then can’t go and buy food themselves.”

An Alberstons’ spokesperson said the store was closed because it was underperforming, according to an article in the Bellingham Herald. After closing, Albertson’s retained ownership of the property and made it available to lease.

At the end of March, the old Albertsons building was sold to the company GGD Oakdale LLC. They announced their intention to build a gym on the property. According to those at the vigil, this has created controversy in the neighborhood, as many people think a gym is unnecessary – particularly in comparison to a grocery store.

According to the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters, part of the lease includes a non-compete clause, which prevents another grocery store from going into the area until 2047. The clause is held among owners of Park Manor properties, according to April Barker, city councilmember for the Birchwood neighborhood. However, with the property under new ownership, there’s an opportunity for the contract to be revised.

Alex McIntyre is a food system organizing fellow for Community to Community Development, a local nonprofit “dedicated to food sovereignty and immigrant rights,” according to their website.

McIntyre graduated from Western with a degree in urban planning and development and said his job now is to talk to people in the community and gather input about what Birchwood residents want and need.

“We have knocked on hundreds of doors. Everyone was on board with the grocery store,” McIntyre said. “Only one person has said a gym is something they’d like to see here.”

McIntyre said some residents have even acknowledged the irony of a gym with little access to food nearby.

“There’s comments on our Facebook page of people saying that they get enough exercise walking to the grocery store,” McIntyre said. “That’s the reality here.”

Barker said the chances of a grocery store going into the old Albertsons building are small.

“A 40,000 square foot local grocery isn’t even financially feasible anymore,” Barker said. “I think we all knew from market demand that it wasn’t likely it was going to turn into a grocery store again because they wouldn’t have closed if they were successful.”

Barker, who was one of the organizers who tried to keep the Albertsons open, said the Birchwood area does have local grocers people can go to, but they are small. These markets include Netos Market & Bakery on West Maplewood Drive and Mi Rancho Meat Market on Northwest Avenue.

Barker said along with city officials and the owner of Netos Market, a dialogue has been opened about ways to support the expansion of the market. Barker said residents want to find a way to bring in a store that would offer many options, but at the same time, they don’t want to hurt these small businesses by bringing in tough competition.

“How can we encourage [local stores] to increase their capacity with healthy fruits and vegetables?” Barker said. “That way we’re not only helping people get access, but also supporting local business owners and business owners of color in our community.”

Jesi van Leeuwen is a Birchwood resident and mother of five. She said she does around 25 percent of her family’s grocery shopping at Netos, but doesn’t think putting all the pressure on small business owners is fair.

“I don’t feel like all of this pressure should lie on [the owner of Netos Market],” van Leeuwen said. “I don’t think everyone should be looking at her and saying, ‘OK, you’re our local grocery store.’ I don’t think that’s fair because she has her limitations and she has barriers that aren’t her fault.”

Barker said the city hasn’t taken any steps to solve the food desert problem in Birchwood directly. Instead, they have supported efforts to expand food accessibility overall.

This support includes funding local food banks in Alderwood and at Christ the King Church, urging WTA to offer more routes through the Birchwood neighborhood and supporting local nonprofit organizations.

“I can totally see where the perception that we’re not doing anything to solve the problem comes from,” Barker said. “I don’t know if we know what the problem is and who are the people and how much money we’re going to put towards it.”

In response to what they see as a lack of action by the city, local groups have stepped up to support the Birchwood area.

Last summer, the Food Fighters operated a food market near the former Albertsons building every weekend. Local farmers donated produce and the Food Fighters would distribute it to residents for free. McIntyre said the group plans on expanding the program this summer due to demand.

As part of the expansion, the Food Fighters plan to work with a group, City Sprouts, to create a food stand in the parking lot of the former Albertsons. The food stand would allow residents to buy food from local farmers at a cheaper price than at the farmers market or a food co-op. McIntyre said residents would also be able to volunteer for shifts at the market in exchange for a box of produce.

Community to Community Development said they also want to give people the opportunity to grow their own food. McIntyre said the nonprofit currently owns a garden plot at the First Christian Church on East Bakerview Road, where they grow produce for the community. The group is trying to get more gardening plots designated for Birchwood residences to grow their own food.

“It’s a lot of little things coming together,” Barker said.