

**The search for sustenance  
(and economic revival)  
in the East End.**

by Sara Dabney Tisdale

# Out of Stock

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**B**randi Cooper and her six children make a beeline through the automatic door of Community Supermarket, a small grocery store in the East End, at 7 on a recent Sunday morning, but they're not the first here.

An older couple beat Cooper by a few short minutes by propping a worn-looking baby stroller, which they use to carry groceries home, against the store's facade at 6:55.

Cooper's children, ages 10 months to 10 years, to the meat section. There, she combs through cut upon cut of pork and beef weighing what to buy, her face glued to the screen of her cell phone. Cooper, 26, isn't texting, but constantly calculating the sum of prices, eventually stacking 19 plastic-wrapped packages of meat into her cart. She just received her August food stamps and needs to make the food she buys today last for an entire month.

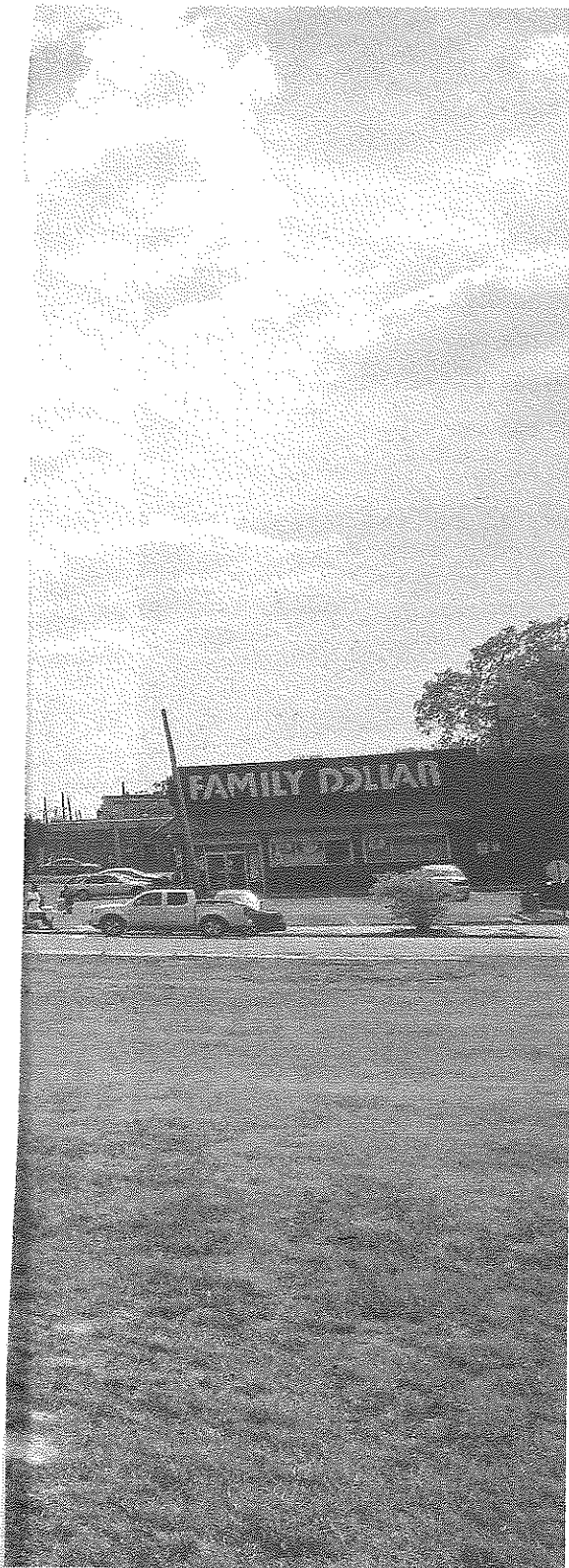
Aug. 1 is the first day of the busiest week for Community Supermarket. The 29,000-square-foot store does most of its business in government benefits. The dawn of a new month means

rush of customers who pour in from surrounding low-income neighborhoods to hustle for first pick among few food options.

In the city's East End, convenience stores and small, independent grocers — with fewer products, less variety and often jacked-up prices — dominate. The dearth of nearby shopping options forces many to cross county lines for food, adding time, expense and hassle for poverty-stricken families, many without cars or steady means to get there.

The East End corridor at 25th Street and Nine Mile Road is a microcosm of the eco-

Over the past decade, the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority has ramped up purchasing of vacant parcels at the corner of 25th and Nine Mile Road, identified by the city and community groups as a potential spot for



policy paper by the city's Economic and Community Development Department identifies the area as one of the most distressed retail areas of the city, with "high levels of physical and social deterioration, and a limited number of businesses that can provide basic goods and services."

It was once a thriving commercial strip and a busy gateway to the city, but the midcentury flight of residents and concentrated poverty have left blight, vacancies and an unstable tax base in its wake. Rehabilitation projects during the past two decades by the Better Housing Coalition and Habitat for Humanity, along with renovations by new residents in nearby Church Hill, the dilab

is a virtual food desert. The administration of Mayor Dwight Jones has placed a high priority on bringing a grocery store, and other retail, to the low-income community. And there's ample demand. At public meetings and in interviews with *Style Weekly*, residents say they desperately need more shopping options.

The effort to bring a grocery store to 25th and Nine Mile offers a case study in inner-city redevelopment: In the economically distressed corridor, retail development offers perhaps the greatest opportunity for revival. Low-barrier grocery jobs — such as clerks, stockers, baggers — offer potential employment to the unemployed. In addition to bringing much-needed everyday staples, such as milk, bread, meats and canned goods, grocery stores also serve as important community gathering places.

But the major retailers and grocery chains with the buying power to bring in stable jobs and low prices are reluctant to invest in areas such as the East End, where high crime and low-income demographics create barriers to entry.

It's a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum that vexes corridors such as 25th and Nine Mile — a grocery store could serve as an anchor, luring other retailers, and helping a community meet its most basic economic needs. But few want to take the risk.

**THE AREA HASN'T ALWAYS** been a food desert. The residents of Richmond's East End have been asking for a grocery store for years, a refrain that's grown more fervent since Johnny Johnson's inner-city chain of Community Pride grocery stores closed in a mire of financial troubles in 2004.

Johnson, once the country's largest minority grocer, operated a Community Pride store on 25th Street, between O and P streets, and another store in the building at Mechanicsville Turnpike and Cool Lane now occupied by Community Supermarket. Then he opened the Market at Tobacco Row on East Main Street in 2002, built to cater to loft residents in Shockoe Bottom.

**Brandi Cooper, 26, enters food prices into a calculator on her cell phone as she shops for the month's groceries with her children early Aug. 1.**

Community Pride at 25th Street shortly after opening the Market, angering many East End residents. The 25th Street grocery space, sitting on an acre between O and P streets, stands vacant after the independent Sunny Supermarket left in 2008.

"Everybody was angry because he left all of us," says Jacquelyne Sims, who lives on Deforrest Street in Whitcomb Court and used to shop at the Community Pride, which offered a shuttle to take customers — and their groceries — home. Sims says she must walk several blocks to get her groceries, bad legs and all, to feed her two children and 88-year-old mother. Sometimes she has to pay someone to bring her home, typically \$10 or \$15, money she doesn't have to spare.

"What you gonna do?" she asks, raising her arms. "The kids are coming home hungry."

Johnson's Community Pride stores, however, were a constant struggle. Most were located in former Safeway stores, and the buildings required constant maintenance. The shuttle service was expensive to operate, and shoplifting was a persistent problem. The extra costs, lower sales volume and thin profit margins — grocery stores typically make a penny and half on the dollar — made for a volatile business model.

The demographic profile: In the Fairfield, Creighton, Mosby and Whitcomb public housing developments, where 5,200 people live, average annual income hovers between \$9,000 and \$11,000, according to the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority. The city census tracts encompassing these neighborhoods harbor some of the most concentrated poverty in Richmond, with 50 percent or more residents living below the poverty line.

Unsurprisingly, Richmond also harbors the region's highest number of households on food stamp assistance, about 25,000 homes in a population of 204,000, compared with 13,000 food stamp households in Henrico County, population 296,000, and 12,000 households in Chesterfield, population 307,000. While Richmond's number of residents increased by less than 1 percent between 2008 and 2009, its food stamp households

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In fact, the city's East End could fit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's broad definition of a food desert, outlined in a June 2009 report. For urban households without use of a vehicle, the department defines low food access as any place more than a mile's walking distance to a supermarket. According to the USDA, areas with low food access are more likely to be racially and economically segregated.

A March report by the Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit, cites one multistate study that found low-income census tracts had half as many supermarkets as high-income tracts, and another showing blacks were less likely than whites to live in tracts with supermarkets.

"If you can't get access to sort of the basic basket of goods, then you are living in a food desert," says John Accordino, an associate professor of urban planning at Virginia Commonwealth University.

On the ground, in the northern part of the city's East End, the picture is stark. The main food retail options for households are visibly limited, with Community Supermarket on Mechanicsville Turnpike and Cool Lane; two Family Dollars along 25th Street and Nine Mile Road and a gaggle of convenience stores and small, independent grocers. It's a bleak landscape compared with the lush food options of the West End's Carytown, a commercial corridor with three supermarkets, a Walgreen's and a CVS within three square blocks.

An informal survey of East End residents on a recent afternoon reveals the lengths people must go to get access to food.

Havana B. Sauls, an elderly resident of Burton Street's Church Hill House who uses a motorized wheelchair after recently losing her legs to diabetes, says she relies on an 81-year-old friend to walk a mile to the Market at Tobacco Row at the beginning of each month. Sauls says her friend carries back both their groceries at one time and walks to other stores for her later in the month as needed.

"I try not to run out," Sauls says.

A 50-year-old resident of 27th and P streets says she walks 30 minutes to Community Supermarket; a young mother living on food stamps in Creighton Court borrows or pays to use a car to drive to Wal-Mart.

AN ANCHOR GROCERY STORE, with the promise of more retail shops and business, is about civic pride as much as it's about access.

For Mary Thompson, a grocery store would fulfill revitalization promises that have been made for decades. Thompson, 73, was born on North 28th Street, played as a child along Nine Mile Road, attended Armstrong High School and has lived in her current house on 22nd Street since 1952. She recalls a time when 25th Street had "all kinds of shops" — five-and-dimes, a shoe repair store, a bakery, a Siegel's.

As president of the East End's New Visions Civic League, Thompson has worked since the 1990s with the Better Housing Coalition and other groups on efforts to revive the 25th Street and Nine Mile Road corridor. With the boost from renderings that emerged from the weeklong East End planning session sponsored by the city, the housing authority and BonSecours Richmond (which envisioned a grocery store, along with Richmond Community Hospital, at the heart of a revived corridor), Thompson firmly believes it's the East End's time.

"We have nothing," she says. "That is why it is just

**Jacquelyne Sims, a resident of Whitcomb Court who used to work for the Central Virginia Food Bank, now relies on monthly donations from the food bank's mobile pantry to supplement food stamp benefits.**



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Thompson's neighbor, fellow New Visions leader Augustine Carter, 82, agrees: "It would bring the community together." Carter lives alone, on a fixed income, with no car. She uses GRTC buses to get around, but not to the stores in her own neighborhood — she shops at the Kroger and Dollar Tree on West Broad Street.

"These corner stores prey on these people," Carter says. "They take advantage of the downtrodden."

Leonard Edloe, who's operated Edloe's Professional Pharmacy on 25th Street since his father died in the early 1970s, says the challenges of bringing better retail to the area will take sustained commitment on

merchants in places such as Carytown are able to "come together, put their money together and ... get things done," he says. "That doesn't happen here."

From 1971 to 1973, Edloe was the president of the board of Model Cities, Lyndon Johnson's federal program that swept through Richmond with grants for building retail stores in impoverished neighborhoods. Edloe has seen 25th Street through several revitalization efforts, including a 2001 public planning session focusing on the East End that was strikingly similar to the one held in June.

"There's a lot of money in this community," Edloe says. "The problem is it goes out of the community."

CITY OFFICIALS ARE KEENLY AWARE of the problem.

"It's one of the toughest areas in the city in terms of social and economic conditions," says Peter Chapman, deputy chief administrative officer for economic development. "One of the voids is basic goods and services."

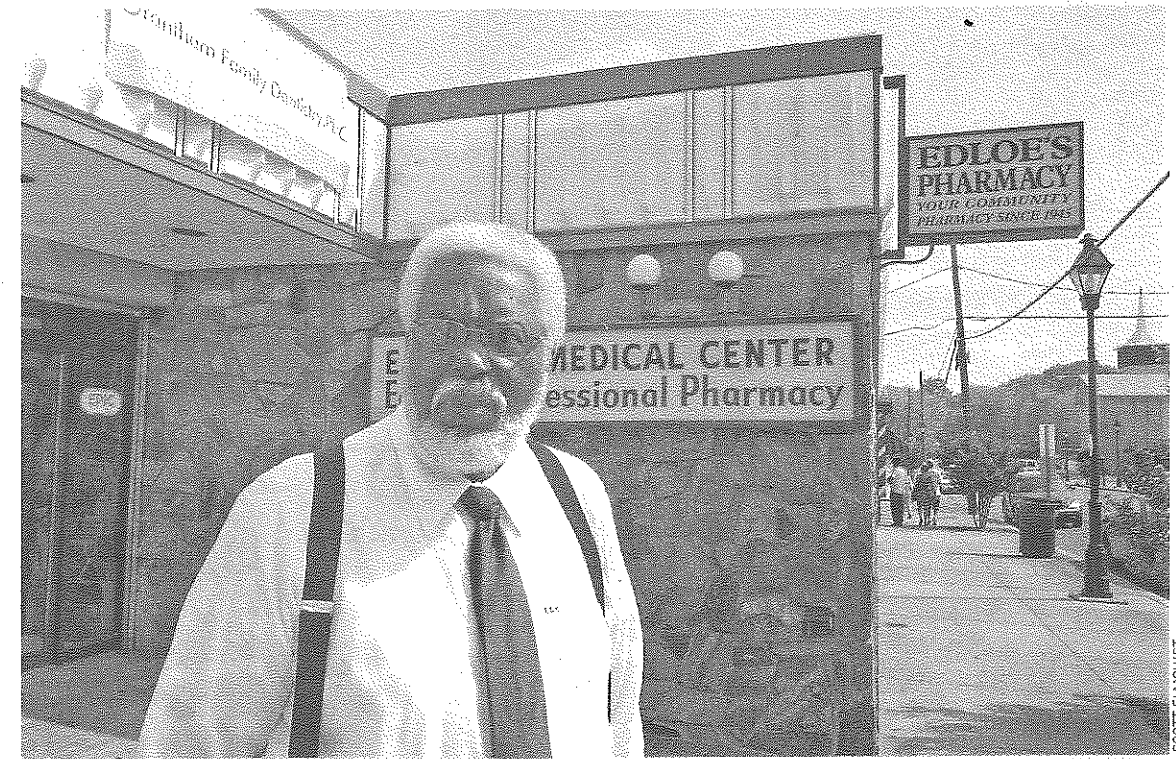
Chapman's office has applied for federal grant money through President Obama's Choice Neighborhoods program in hopes of spurring development in an area where the numbers for attracting bigger retailers don't automatically add up.

The plan, he says, is to offer incentives to lure retailers, including a grocery store, to 25th and Nine Mile. He points to a set of vacant parcels owned by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority at 25th Street and Nine Mile "that we believe lends itself to a supermarket," he says.

"We have spoken to developers and entities that represent supermarket chains and ... we have begun to tease out the elements" for a request for proposals, Chapman says. Still, he acknowledges that any city plan for a store will need to pass market muster. New data will be needed "to quantify the anecdotal data that we have," he says.

In 2001, the Better Housing Coalition sponsored a market study proposing to expand the existing Community Pride or lure another grocery operator to the 25th and Nine Mile corridor. The study found sufficient demand in the area to support a 28,000-square-foot grocery store with potential 2001 sales

**Leonard Edloe, owner of Edloe's Pharmacy chain, in front of his store on North 25th Street. "You've got this perception thing," Edloe says. "If you locate in a certain area, you're just not as good."**



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of \$8 million.

The study also found the market "should be sufficient to interest local retail chains and independent operators that target inner city markets."

T.K. Somanath, president and chief executive of the Better Housing Coalition, says the nonprofit was in talks with a real estate developer and Food Lion

a few years after the 2001 study about building a grocery store at the intersection. Food Lion, after completing its own assessment of the area, expressed interest in opening a store on 25th Street, he says. But the Better Housing Coalition never received a formal response to the proposal from the housing authority, which owns property.

**"There has to be some reason other than altruism for them to want to do it. This is a business. It's not a public-service venture."**



SELLING THE EAST END to national grocery chains isn't easy. "There's more competition than you might imagine," says VCU's Accordino. With the plethora of major chains such as Food Lion, Save-a-Lot and Wal-Mart only a few miles up Mechanicsville Turnpike and Nine Mile Road, the trade area appears on paper to be well-served.

"We can talk a good game about wanting to redevelop areas in the city but there has to be an economic reason for any chain to want to locate there," says David Urban, a professor of marketing at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Business.

**A supermarket building on North 25th Street, vacant since 2008, has housed several grocery operators, including a Community Pride.**

In essence, the formula comes down to population base and median income. "There has to be some reason other than altruism for them to want to do it," Urban says. "This is a business. It's not a public-service venture."

Rodney Saunders, a former manager for Community Pride, says the 25th Street store averaged about \$95,000 a week in sales in the early 2000s, and was at one point the third most profitable store in the Community Pride chain. Still, the weekly sales numbers pale in comparison to the suburban-focused chains; locally, for example, a Kroger averages more than \$350,000 a week. Saunders says he an-

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proached the city in hopes of reopening the store at the 25th and Nine Mile site a few years ago, but says he got no response. He currently manages a Farmer's Foods grocery store in Highland Springs.

Another major hurdle is the East End's crime statistics, according to real estate experts. Whether employing an off-duty police officer, an otherwise tighter security system or accounting for shoplifting inventory loss, higher-than-average crime means a leaner bottom line

"It's been known as a high crime area," says Brian Glass, senior vice president of retail brokerage with Grubb & Ellis/Harrison & Bates, of the East End. "Sometimes it's a reality and sometimes it's a perception." Glass points to Johnny Johnson's Community Pride as the prevailing example of a grocery chain that catered to and survived in an inner-city neighborhood. But Community Pride went out of business. "Their resources were limited," Glass says.

more stringent on their requirements," says Connie Nielsen, a senior vice president at Thalheimer Commercial Real Estate, who has represented corporate grocers in Richmond.

One challenge is space, Nielsen says. "You've got to have a site that actually accommodates one of their footprints," she says. Food Lion, Richmond's market leader with 52 stores, operates on a 35,000-square-foot template and caters to areas with average-income demographics, Nielsen says. If a collection of parcels passes Food Lion's square-footage requirement, the extra space needed for parking still rears. Food Lion aims for 4.5 parking spaces per thousand square feet, she says — or 158 spaces for an average-sized store — nearly impossible in most inner-city neighborhoods.

"Being in the community is great," Nielsen says, but "your national guys are not going to go, 'OK, well 50 percent of the people are going to take public transportation so I'm going to go ahead and reduce my parking by 50 percent.'"

There's also a wide disparity in the shopping patterns, and profit expectations, between suburban and urban grocery stores.

Joseph K. Lee, owner of Community Supermarket at Mechanicsville Turnpike and Cool Lane and Community Supermarket at Southside Plaza, which occupies former Farmer's Foods and Community Pride spaces, has been in the inner-city food business for 25 years.

**Brandi Cooper, a resident of Whitcomb Court, checks out with her children Aug. 1.**

Lee sees his best sales during the first week of the month, but his numbers are modest, he says: \$40,000 to \$45,000 on the first day of the month and about \$6,000 to \$7,000 a day in the last week.

Lee stays competitive with big-box and discount grocery chains by catering his cuts of meat to the tastes of his customers, offering a dollar aisle and touting deals such as 10 items for \$10.

"You've got to sell what they want to buy, not what you want to sell," says John D. "Johnny" Farmer, owner of the regional Farmer's Food grocery chain that targets mostly rural, low-income areas in Virginia and North Carolina. That means marketing smaller unit prices, Farmer says: "Four-roll toilet tissue sells for 88 cents. A 12-pack sells over \$2. The 12-pack will last him three weeks. But he doesn't have that money."

For Brandi Cooper, who lives in the Whitcomb Court public housing development, Community Supermarket isn't enough. Yes, her purchases on a recent morning — totaling \$171.60 — are more than the \$40 minimum needed to secure a ride home in one of the store's white Chevy vans, with heavy plastic bins in the back. Because she's here early, Cooper avoids a midmorning line of carts brimming with piles upon piles of white plastic bags, waiting for that free ride.

But Cooper does not own a car and says she stopped making trips to another independent East End grocery store because the bus fare to what she thought was better-quality meat got too expensive. Cooper still needs a ride to Wal-Mart for better prices on the bread, fruits and vegetables (and snacks) for her children. Her ride falls through this morning, so she'll have to wait.

What some might see as a hardship, Cooper considers good fortune. The \$1,052 she receives in food stamps each month is more than enough to keep her family well fed, she says, and unlike other residents of public and low-income housing in this area, she doesn't have to pay for a ride out to stores in Chesterfield and Henrico. Nor does she rely on donations from the Central Virginia Food Bank or Peter Paul Development Center.

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