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VIEWPOINT

Four points to reframe the debate on public supermarkets in New York City

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Introduction

New York City's food retail landscape is dominated by small-scale retailers that make neighborhoods unique and culturally tailored. I once counted 88 produce vendors and grocers within four blocks of Manhattan's Chinatown, a shopping artery that serves an East Asian panoply of specialty foods. Whereas supermarkets are the dominant destination for grocery shopping around the county, for the 1,000 supermarkets scattered around New York City (NYC), there are 25,000 independent stores, thousands of mobile produce vendors, and nearly 140 farmers markets (Sowder, 2022). The food and beverage sector is a major engine of employment, providing one in four jobs (New York State Comptroller, 2020).

There has been rapid growth in national supermarket franchises opening across the city, and now NYC Mayor Mamdani's administration is advancing plans to establish five publicly owned supermarkets in response to rising food insecurity and food costs. This plan is narrowly focused on large-scale retail solutions to improve underutilized, city-owned property. But this strategy should be more holistic; it should include small, culturally embedded food businesses and community organizations that already contribute to food access, affordability, and resilience, but need more support. NYC's diverse retail food economy, emerging food council initiatives, and Manhattan's Chinatown offer evidence that resilient food systems are built through decentralized social, economic, and supply-chain relationships embedded in place.

The need for city government to address food affordability and access is acute. It is admirable to see the urgency with which it is being handled by the Mamdani administration. Mamdani used his Ugandan and Indian food identity to connect with constituents during his campaign through a resurgence of his rap video as "Mr. Cardamon," set in a Halal food cart, and by interviewing on Palestine while eating biryani with his fingers, as do over a billion South Asians and those who are a part of its global diaspora. He should keep in mind food producers and vendors from immigrant communities

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as he advances his campaign promise for a public supermarket in each of the five boroughs of NYC.

The first public supermarket will be in La Marqueta, the failing, city-owned public market in East Harlem (New York City Office of the Mayor, 2026). There is much debate on whether the city can be successful at supplying low-cost food items in an industry that operates on thin margins and high volume. The public cost of the project is very high, estimated at US$30 million to build the first market, and anywhere between US$60 and US$100 million to operate annually. For such a high price tag, there is critical, additional context to consider before implementing a public supermarket plan—or else we may miss the chance to uplift existing community assets, particularly small, culturally focused food businesses and community organizations that work on anti-hunger and local food system initiatives. A city council agenda from 2019 stated that "every neighborhood should have food businesses that reflect the community's cultures and diversity" (Johnson et al., 2019). This is a moment to act as if this perspective is still valued.

Trends in Supermarket Formation in NYC

Private capital is already flowing to create supermarkets in NYC. Are public funds needed in this space? National food chains, such as Key Food and Associated Supermarkets, are strong and growing in the city, rising from 377 to 394 stores from 2024 to 2025 alone. That includes the discount grocers Aldi, which now has 14 stores, and Lidl, which built 10 stores in just two years (Bowles et al., 2025). In fact, there are three discount supermarkets—Aldi, Lidl, and Costco—already located within one mile—just six blocks—to the east and west of the proposed site of the first public supermarket. Affordability between supermarket chains varies wildly, but these three are among the least expensive. A pricing survey we did at Washington College's Center for Environment and Society found that a weekly market basket of groceries, enough to feed a family of four with home-cooked, nutritious meals, cost 36% less at Aldi than at chains like Safeway and Acme. Aldi is on par with Walmart for grocery store pricing.

Furthermore, the intervention of placing affordable, full-service private or public supermarkets in "food deserts," or any low-income neighborhood without an existing supermarket, is laudable, but has not been enough to improve food security nor public health (Atanasova et al., 2022). Despite rapid growth in the number of supermarkets in NYC, persistent supply gaps between what people need and what is available remain. Neighborhoods where a low-cost grocer recently opened, like Corona in Queens, Kingsbridge in the Bronx, and Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, all have above-average rates of food insecurity and food supply gaps (Reynolds, 2025).

Food Councils Aim For Equity in Communities

Low-cost supermarkets are key pieces of our food environment, but public support is needed for alternative strategies for resilient food systems and food security. Planning, organization, and intervention need to occur at the neighborhood scale, where "people live, work, and play." Community food systems must be seen for what they are: decentralized but interrelated networks of businesses and organizations. Food retailers, wholesalers, and restaurants operate alongside community organizations, food pantries, churches, and schools to provide groceries and meals. Civic associations provide business services, public agencies enroll SNAP and WIC recipients, agricultural extension agents and urban agricultural programs provide nutrition education and technology transfer to farmers and gardeners. Food as medicine programs run through health networks to prescribe produce vouchers. The list goes on. Every community has its own constellation of public, private, and charitable businesses and organizations—both large and small—that make up its food system.

We need to use a holistic approach to understanding and supporting community food systems, and not just rely on public or private supermarkets. Investment on the scale of what Mamdani proposes—even a percentage point of what he proposes—could send out ripple effects if invested in existing community-scale approaches to identifying what assets need to be created or shored up. Existing city programs already recognize the need for community-level interventions. The Community Food Connections program that is tasked with reducing city neighborhoods' food supply gaps

recommends investing in the capacity of small and medium-sized food providers, including storage, refrigeration, technology, inventory management, transport, and staffing, and helping them apply for grants and find capital as well as opportunities for new investment strategies (NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy, 2025). Why not invest in small and medium-sized food providers? Why keep investing in large supermarkets through tax benefits, as the existing program Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) already does (NYC Economic Development Corporation, 2026)?

Capacity-building at the community level is the conversation being held in the food councils that I participate in upstate New York, the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and a historic immigrant neighborhood in NYC that has long been a site of my interest, Manhattan's Chinatown (Imbruce, 2015). These kinds of community-scale interventions are well recognized by the people doing the work; they need more public recognition to move municipal and state government actors to allocate resources. Food councils with direct ties to government are known to perform better; in fact, the ability for food councils to be involved in the policy process necessitates a willingness of government actors to engage with them (Bassarab et al., 2019). Other unlikely sectors, like mine (higher education), are devoting human and financial capital to community food systems work by doing applied research to target interventions, facilitate nonprofits' work, and understand communities' needs (Gajewski et al., 2025).

While they are a very small segment of food policy and governance, food councils are on the rise across the country and can play a role in NYC's landscape, interfacing with the existing government agencies, such as the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and the Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture. In New York, Equity Advocates has pulled together over 50 organizations into the NYC Food Policy Alliance. They are working with 13 active local food councils throughout the state, alongside NYS Senate and Assembly sponsors, to advocate and appropriate US$2 million for such efforts. Their bottom line is that local food councils in every region can build capacity through strengthening existing programs for healthy people, strong local economies, and climate-resistant food futures (New York Equity Advocates, n.d.; NYS Community Food Collaborative, n.d.).

Social Networks are Critical for Resilient Food Systems; Manhattan's Chinatown Offers a Model

At the neighborhood scale, Manhattan's Chinatown is a model for resilient community food systems. I take inspiration from the people who work in its food system. Small, owner-operated businesses can provide a vibrant community food system that caters to nutritional, linguistic, and cultural needs. They should not be overlooked as part of the city's food security strategy. In Chinatown, a farm-to-market supply-chain network that spans local to global scales keeps street-level shelves stocked with fresh and affordable specialty Asian and mainstream produce items. Key to this supply chain are low overhead and high volume. Food retailers are bare-bones operations clustered along the busiest thoroughfares. Their proximity to wholesale and retail markets for cooling and delivery infrastructure, and their storefront and street vending, make Chinatown a quick and easy, as well as one-of-a-kind, shopping destination.

I have also learned cautionary tales from the changes I have observed in Chinatown. The wholesale sector is all but gone, having moved to Queens and Brooklyn because the Manhattan rent is too high. Street vending has declined by half. And business owners report a loss of patronage and impossible costs of doing business. The most recent shock to the livelihoods of food businesses was COVID-19, by which Chinatown was disproportionally affected and slower to rebound compared to neighborhoods that are not predominately Asian-American (Yi et al., 2022). Food retailers and farmers have told me that the hustle and bustle of the food economy is not like it used to be, when a sea of people shopped on the weekends and came in from out of town. A third-generation Chinese-American farmer whose grandfather started growing for Chinatown in the 1950s continues to do so, even though he takes a loss in this market. He, and others, hold on, wanting to serve a neighborhood that is important to their families' trajectories and to others seeking their own American dream.

Businesses like this hold on, in part, because of

relationships. Social infrastructure undergirds our supply chains. Trusted, exclusive relationships are the secret sauce of the grocery business. Wholesalers play an important behind-the-scenes role. They open access to city markets, they are lynch pins in the system, and they extend capital as well as critical market knowledge to growers. By supporting growers, they protect their own suppliers, but they also help reduce waste ("shrinkage," as it is known in the industry), which runs up costs that are passed to the consumer. In perishable markets where tractor-trailers–sized shipments are made from farms across oceans or continents, maintaining the quality of the inventory and trust between trade partners is key. I have also observed social values that operate in specialty grocery businesses. Accompanying the need to turn a profit is the desire to help others, be part of reciprocal relationships, and provide culturally relevant foods to keep culinary traditions alive and to introduce them to new audiences.

Four Points to Reframe Public Support for Food Systems Resilience

The Mamdani administration, or any municipal administration, need to initiate programs that improve food systems resilience and community food security. Some community leaders and business owners, like my community partners in Chinatown, do not want a public supermarket in their neighborhood and do not support public investment in it for important reasons (von Massow, 2026). I can boil the issue down to four areas of consideration common to any community when planning food systems interventions.

1. **Place matters:** Consider what products the demographics of the neighborhood require, what is already provided and what is not, and how to mitigate the potential for displacement of existing businesses due to a large public intervention. Pay attention to the relationships between actors in the place of focus.
2. **Scale matters:** Consider what size of farmers and food suppliers can succeed selling to a public supermarket or any new market, and be inclusive of small-scale and newcomers to the industry (such as by using contract requirements and regulations that work for them). Build trusting relationships.
3. **Timeliness matters:** Food suppliers are often strapped for cash, inventory turns over quickly, and payments must be made rapidly. Note that the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act establishes net-10-day payments as critical to the produce industry. Timely payments are crucial for trusted, durable trade relations.
4. **Values matter:** Aligning and articulating values during the procurement process are needed to build trust and transparency in new markets, from producers through to consumers. People express their beliefs and cultural values through what they grow and how they eat.

The proposition for a major public investment in food security should go well beyond making good use of city-owned land, which is one of the core objectives of the public supermarket initiative. Who stands to win from any public investment is not the only question; who stands to lose as well? Communities have existing assets that need to be built upon, not sidelined or overlooked by the specter of a new supermarket.

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