

## Food Access: Gainesville Swamps and Deserts

Gators are used to living in the swamp. We brag about Saturday afternoon football in The Swamp and Saturday night dinner at The Swamp. It's part of our culture. But we are also home to another kind of swamp, one that leaves the land around it dry enough to become a desert: a food swamp.

One quick drive down Archer Road will have you nodding in agreement. Archer Road between 34th and I-75 is overflowing with chain restaurants, fast food joints, casual dining, convenience stores, and multiple grocery stores. A few new establishments somehow carved out more retail space in the past few months; the choices for mealtime seem endless.

About two miles northwest there is a neighborhood that looks very different from the Archer Road abundance. The census tracts south of I-75 and east of Tower Road are classified by the United States Department of Agriculture as "food deserts" – areas where a significant number of residents live more than one mile from a grocery store[1]. In this area, many of these residents have no access to a car; it could take about forty minutes by foot and thirty minutes by bus to arrive at the nearest grocery store. There is no alternative source of fresh food in this neighborhood, other than one tiny community garden at the Southwest Advocacy Group center; hence, obtaining a healthy dinner is likely a two hour long challenge.

For most students and residents of Gainesville, having a concentrated food swamp is not a problem. Most of us have cars and could access these stores no matter where they were located. But for the non-vehicle toting residents of Gainesville – the ones most often with the lowest income, the highest stress, and the greatest need for healthy food options – a food swamp leading to a food desert impairs health and widens the socioeconomic divide. Well-intentioned urban planning should provide everything a city needs within the reach of every citizen, and this group is being left out of arm's length.

Reversing this is only a matter of recognizing the problem. Building and opening more food venues in the same block over and over does not fill a need; it exacerbates it. Whether through building a new large store, enhancing an existing small store, or even creating more efficient bus routes, we should ensure that every citizen has equal access to the tools they need for good health. Spreading out the swamp will take us one step closer to being a truly united Gator Nation.

[1] - <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas>

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