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County struggles to find food desert solution for residents

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Carla Vianna, Alligator Staff Writer | 0 comments

Most Gainesville residents don't worry about reaching the closest grocery store.

But for residents in Linton Oaks who depend on public transit, it's about a 25-minute bus ride — or a 50-minute walk — to the nearest grocery store.

Linton Oaks is one of seven low-income neighborhoods that create a pocket of food deserts in Alachua County. Located west of Interstate 75

and east of Tower Road, the area is classified as a food desert by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for its limited access to fresh, healthy and affordable food. Now, the USDA is replacing the term food desert with "low access and low income" areas.

The Southwest Advocacy Group Family Resource Center, a nonprofit center located inside Linton Oaks, works to bridge that gap by providing healthy food options to the seven neighborhoods: Linton Oaks, Majestic Oaks Apartments, Tower Oaks Glen, Holly Heights, Gordon Manor, Hidden Oaks and Harbor Cove Apartments.

In 2014, the Alachua County Commission approved a project to build a road that will connect the four neighborhoods directly west of Linton Oaks to its facilities, which include the resource center and a new, full-service health clinic.

That road, however, won't be built for another two to three years, said Ruth Findley, the project manager.

And without a change in bus routes, the nearest grocery store will continue to be a 25-minute bus ride or a 50-minute walk away.

Across the I-75 overpass, within a mile east of Linton Oaks, are Canopy Apartments and Cabana Beach.

"It is right here in our backyard," said Tony Delisle, a UF health education and behavior adjunct professor and SWAG Board chairman since 2013.

The housing units around Linton Oaks were built at a time when the county was more lenient toward code enforcements, he said.

Buildings were built with cheap material, County Commissioner Robert Hutchinson said, adding that the duplexes and quadruplexes were originally meant to house students. But as better options moved closer to the university campus, so did the students.

"It's a symphony of different factors," Delisle said.

Hutchinson said lower-income residents replaced the students. Crime rose, and property values dropped.

So the pocket of neighborhoods west of I-75 was left with its cheaply built buildings and roads without sidewalks.

And there they remained — disconnected from the city on the other side of the overpass.

In Linton Oaks, tricycles sit on bare driveways.

Cars can be seen driving up and down Southwest 61st Street, a half-mile-long road that winds from Southwest 20th Avenue to an abrupt dead-end stop at the back of the neighborhood. But still, more people can be seen walking around.

"There's a lot of people out here without cars," said Leslie Stewart, a Linton Oaks resident.

It's a neighborhood where people sit on their front porches, kids play outside, neighbors know each other's names and teenagers ride their bikes in and out of the cul-de-sacs.

The nearest food source is the Maa & Paa Grocery Store, a gas-station-like convenience store located within the neighborhood.

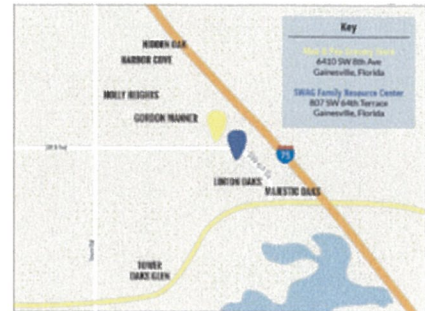
But the store does little more than satisfy ice cream cravings and supply basic items like soap.

"It's there and meets emergency needs, but it's not a solution," said Jenn Peticion, the director of community and government relations for Partnership for Strong Families, the organization that operates the SWAG Center.



Carla Vianna / Alligator Staff

Pictured is the SWAG Family Resource Center, a nonprofit center located in Linton Oaks which works to provide healthy food options for surrounding neighborhoods.



Alligator Staff

The Southwest Eighth Avenue Connector will enhance access to the SWAG Center for the surrounding neighborhoods. This will help the surrounding community — considered a food desert by the U.S. Department of Agriculture — because the nearest grocery store is about a 25-minute bus ride away.

The store's back shelf holds a colorful array of sodas. Next to it, a variety of meat is cased in a small freezer. For \$5.99, one could buy almost two pounds of chicken nuggets, and for \$17.99, a bag of shrimp.

The Winn-Dixie on Southwest 34th Street is only two and a half miles away, but no direct bus route goes there. Many take the 25-minute bus ride to Publix at Butler Plaza, which is about 3 miles away.

Those who rely on the bus have one option: route 75.

It runs every 35 to 53 minutes on weekdays starting at 6 a.m., and makes its last trip from Butler Plaza to Linton Oaks at 6:30 p.m.

"Monday through Friday, it's not that bad," said resident Raymond Grable. "On the weekends, forget about it."

On Saturdays, the 29-and-a-half-mile route runs every 105 minutes.

It doesn't run on Sundays.

"With no car, it's really hard," Stewart said.

Stewart makes a trip to Walmart once a month. She gets the basics: meats, vegetables and potatoes, but she's restricted to foods that won't rot too quickly.

She said she wishes she could make it to the downtown farmers market and back before the buses stopped running.

"You talk about food desert," she said. "It's just kind of a desert — for everything."

* * *

The Southwest Eighth Avenue Connector will enhance access to the SWAG Center for the surrounding neighborhoods.

A road to connect Southwest 61st Street — the street that runs through Linton Oaks — to Southwest Eighth Avenue will be built. The project includes adding sidewalks, gutters and bike lanes on Southwest 61st Street as well as a new intersection to be built at the entrance of the neighborhood at Southwest 20th Avenue, according to project documents from the Engineering and Operations Division of the Alachua County Department of Public Works.

The project was approved in May 2014, Findley said. This portion of the project, including the connector, road improvements and new intersection, will cost about \$13.4 million.

Construction will start in fall 2016.

But until then, residents from Holly Heights, Gordon Manor, Hidden Oaks and Harbor Cove will have to make the 3- to 4-mile walk to the SWAG Center.

While residents from Majestic Oaks and Tower Oaks Glen can walk to the SWAG building in 20 minutes or less, residents from the other four neighborhoods face an hourlong walk on busy roads.

There's a shorter route, about a 15-minute walk, but the path runs through the Cornerstone mobile home park directly behind Linton Oaks, and that area is private property.

"People are scared because the police messes with them," said Marie Curtis, the mother of two Linton Oaks residents.

Alachua County Sheriff's Office Lt. Sherry French said three people have been stopped for trespassing while walking through since March 1, but none were charged. She said police officers use discretion when responding to a trespassing call in the area.

"Some woman walking through with her children shouldn't have to walk all the way around," she said.

Antwain Vinson takes the shortcut.

He lives in Harbor Cove, a neighborhood about a mile away from Linton Oaks.

If caught by an officer, Vinson could get by with a trespassing warning. If caught a second time, he could be arrested.

But — like others who live on the other end of the trash-littered trail that stems from the back of Linton Oaks, Vinson is just trying to get to the bus.

"It's easier to catch here," he said.

Other days, he comes over to see his aunt.

"They block the fence," Vinson said. "They put grease on it, so you slip if you climb the fence."

* * *

Delisle said zoning regulations can hinder a supermarket from opening in the area, which is predominantly residential.

An increase in bus routes is also unlikely for now, Hutchinson said.

Because Linton Oaks sits outside of Gainesville city limits, route 75 is primarily funded by the county, said Chip Skinner, the marketing and communications supervisor for the Regional Transit System.

"We would love to fund three or four times as many buses as we do," Comm. Hutchinson said, adding that the county's budget constrains them from doing so.

The SWAG Center works to bring change from within.

"It will always require good people to step up, be generous and understand the larger problem it creates if we ignore the smaller problems," Hutchinson said.

Pioneered by nine women who wanted to help their community, the center was formed through a triple partnership between SWAG, Partnership for Strong Families and the county.

Since it's opening in 2012, the center has started various food-centered initiatives, including a Wednesday food pantry, a community garden and free breakfast and lunch for children during the summer months.

The center also partnered with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to offer a free, six-week cooking class, starting Thursday, where residents will be taught how to plan and make healthy meals and will be given a bag of groceries to take home during each class.

The more community members become involved, the more educated they'll become about healthy food options.

And the more outside members advocate for change, the more it will come, Delisle said.

"It's doable," he said. "We've had our own successes."

A few of those include the advocacy center, an after school program for students, the summer program for children and, most recently, the SW Health Clinic.

"It's an ongoing issue," he said, "and it's a work in progress."

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