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'Grocery truck caters to underserved market', David Runk, *theGrio* (online) via Associated Press.

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Grocery truck caters to underserved market

By theGrio via AP

DAVID RUNK, Associated Press Writer

In a U.S. neighbourhood served by 26 liquor stores but only one grocery, a community group is peddling fresh fruits and vegetables like ice cream.

Five days a week, the Peaches & Greens truck winds its way through the streets as a loudspeaker plays R&B and puts out the call: “Nutritious, delicious. Brought right to you. We have green and red tomatoes, white and sweet potatoes. We have greens, corn on the cob and cabbage, too.”

The truck set up like a small market brings affordable produce to families on public assistance, homebound seniors and others who can’t reach the well-stocked grocery chains in the suburbs.

Experts call Detroit a food desert: More than half of its residents must travel at least twice as far to reach the nearest grocery store as they do to a fast-food restaurant or convenience store. Many shop at liquor stores and corner markets that carry few, if any, fresh fruits and vegetables.

Some who have studied the city say people in developing countries can more easily get fresh produce.

The lack of fresh food is a public health problem in Detroit, which has one of the nation’s highest obesity rates. Other cities also are struggling with obesity, diabetes and other illnesses tied to diets high in calories and sugar. They’re trying a variety of ways to solve the problem, from adding pushcart vendors who sell fresh fruits and vegetables in New York to a moratorium on new fast-food restaurants in part of Los Angeles.

But Detroit’s limited public transportation makes it difficult for those without cars to get to farmers markets or suburban stores, and decades of population decline – from 1.8 million in the 1950s to half that now – have made most neighbourhoods in the 138square-mile city too sparse to support corner produce stands.

“The truck delivery system is one that makes sense in Detroit because of the spread-out situation and the lack of transportation that reaches food venues,” said Dave D. Weatherspoon, an associate professor at Michigan State University. “We thought that was a pretty good place to get started.”

Peaches & Greens has community gardens, where volunteers grow greens, tomatoes and other vegetables to help stock the truck. The food also is offered at a neighbourhood produce market, and organizers hope to persuade liquor stores and corner markets to stock their vegetables.

“People will buy it,” said Lisa Johanon, executive director of the non-profit Central Detroit Christian Community Development Corp., which runs Peaches & Greens. “We’ve seen the stereotype that urban communities won’t eat healthy, and we’re seeing that isn’t true.”