



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jose M. Serrano

Senator Serrano Testimony for City Planning Commission Public Hearing on the FRESH Program

JOSÉ M. SERRANO August 5, 2009

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I applaud the City for its proactive strategies to combat the shortage of healthy and affordable food throughout the five boroughs. Last year, I convened a task force of local stakeholders to address concerns and identify solutions in East Harlem, and my office even mapped out the closures of several local grocery stores. As part of that process, I had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the Department of City Planning and the Mayor's Office, and I was impressed by their expertise and thorough understanding of the problem.

The Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) Program comes at a watershed moment. The communities I represent in Manhattan and the Bronx are experiencing great economic insecurity. At the same time, these communities hold the keys to their own revitalization. For example, expanded food stamp benefits under the federal stimulus package translate to greater purchasing power for so many of my constituents; the potential for homegrown business is strong.

The package of financial and zoning incentives in the FRESH Program, if implemented correctly, will further bridge the gap between consumer and supplier in my district, with tremendous public health benefits. Nevertheless, I do wish to convey some of my own concerns, and also those concerns raised by community and advocacy organizations:

- The FRESH maps show high supermarket need in and around public housing complexes, yet there is no specific component of the report that outlines collaboration with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). Given NYCHA's budget deficit, and its sizeable property holdings throughout the city, I recommend the creation of an inter-agency task force to ensure that FRESH incentives help foster supermarket development at public housing sites.
- I have been a strong supporter of the State's Healthy Food / Healthy Communities initiative, which was announced by Governor Paterson in January 2009. It will support the development of fresh food retailers through a \$10-million program of loans and grants in high-need urban and rural communities. In the interest of government efficiency, City and State officials should work together to coordinate efforts and share resources. Appropriate standards should be determined sooner rather than later for stores that wish to apply to both programs.
- The United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1500, as well as Manhattan Community Board 11, have recommended prevailing wage and "first source" hiring considerations in the incentive programs. Several New York City supermarkets have been found to violate labor law in recent years, in particular forcing immigrant employees to work for tips but no wage. The City must take every necessary step to ensure that government incentives are not directed to abusive storeowners. I also support the UFCW and CB 11 recommendation that participating supermarkets should be required to accept EBT and WIC.

