

MAYOR DE BLASIO'S JAIL PROPOSAL THREATENS CHINATOWN'S FOOD EQUITY

BY VALERIE IMBRUCE

Food is a fundamental human right. And lawmakers in New York City agree but will they consider food equity when proposing new development?

Earlier this month, Council Speaker Corey Johnson [unveiled](#) a plan to combat food inequity in New York City, outlining the city's current hunger problems, and proposing ways to improve access, equity, and reduce waste. Consequently, Councilwoman Margaret S. Chin [introduced](#) legislation to develop a plan to combat food insecurity for seniors in New York City, asserting that "food justice is for everyone."

Their proposals are laudable, and their claims have much merit. It is inspiring that New York City government is taking action to improve food security and sustainability. The food environment at a neighborhood scale plays a large role in the health and well-being of its residents. In the case of Chinatown, the food environment is also a magnet for tourists and a unique shopping destination for people from many ethnic backgrounds, not only those of East Asian descent. The food industry cluster in Chinatown—the restaurants, retail markets, supply shops, and food manufacturers—provide up to a quarter of all jobs in Chinatown. It is a cultural and economic jewel worth preserving.

I urge City Council to consider the effect of any new development on a community's food environment. It should be folded into the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) process. The most pressing case we are currently facing in Chinatown is Mayor de Blasio's borough-based jails proposal, which is headed to a final vote by the New York City Council, where Councilwoman Chin, who represents Chinatown, holds pivotal vote.

The mayor's 10-year, \$11 billion taxpayer funded plan to shut down Rikers Island includes building a 490-foot detention center in the heart of Chinatown, an undertaking that will take roughly ten years. The disruption to pedestrian activity and transportation during the prolonged construction period can undermine the food security of vulnerable populations that rely on nearby, walkable, food markets. Furthermore, this project can further the displacement of small businesses that I have already witnessed in Chinatown's food system. Since the early 2000s, there are now 50% fewer produce markets and street vendors. Five of the eight produce wholesalers in Chinatown have left.

Whereas local grocery stores in neighborhoods throughout New York City supply themselves from a large, centralized distribution centers, Chinatown markets do quite the opposite.

The 40-plus grocers in Chinatown work on a micro basis. They buy from wholesale distributors that reside near Chinatown, and the distributors purchase from small to medium sized, often immigrant-run farms that grow Asian vegetables and fruits along the East Coast as well as from farmers in Mexico and Honduras.

The proximity between wholesalers and retailers means the retailers can bypass expensive and timely trucking and do so without outstanding investments in onsite storage, in turn avoiding large overhead costs.

That's why the produce in Chinatown is so cheap. And so fresh.

Those who buy their produce in Chinatown are used to perusing down Mott Street and East Broadway, encountering an abundance of vendors who often have more than 150 different types of produce to choose from – some items that can't be found anywhere else in Manhattan.

But it may not be this way for long if it is not recognized and protected. Chinatown used to have close to ninety produce retailers, and roughly ten wholesalers—but these numbers are dwindling over the past decade. Chinatown's food system has the potential to be a model for other low-income neighborhoods that don't have access to fresh foods—ones that the Department of City Planning has prioritized in its [Food Retail Expansion to Support Health Program](#) (FRESH) program with zoning and tax incentives to attract large grocery stores. Chinatown is an alternative to this kind of development.

Mayor de Blasio's plan to build a 490-foot prison in Chinatown can have irreparable damages to Chinatown food system.

Speaker Johnson, who has pled for “stronger governance” on food equity, and Councilwoman Chin, who claims to “prioritize the well-being, health, and safety of residents” in her community, should act in the best interest of their constituents, stand by their comments, and consider how mayor de Blasio's jails proposal will impact Chinatown's food system, one of the city's historically richest and most vibrant food hubs.

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