

## Systemic Disinvestment and the Metabolic Rift

The District of Columbia enters the 2027 mayoral term facing an acute, bifurcated economic reality that is most visibly manifested through the lens of metabolic and nutritional access. While topline macroeconomic indicators point to post-pandemic gross domestic product gains and declining unemployment, the working-class majority remains isolated from these benefits by deeply entrenched structural barriers. As of early 2025, approximately 40 percent of households in the District struggle with food insecurity, reflecting a total lack of progress by previous administrations.

The severity of this crisis has reached historic heights, with an unprecedented number of families experiencing very low food security, characterized by disrupted eating patterns, skipped meals, and chronic nutritional deprivation.

This crisis is not an accidental byproduct of a neutral market; it is the structural consequence of "food apartheid"—the intentional and systemic withholding of resources from marginalized Black communities, particularly those east of the Anacostia River. Decades of historical redlining, racist banking practices, and the commodification of basic human needs have left Wards 7 and 8 severely underserved. This structural abandonment has been exacerbated by the expiration of pandemic-era safety nets, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) emergency allotments, which previously provided over \$14 million in monthly relief to 90,000 households.

The crisis is further deepened by federal budget reconciliation measures that slashed SNAP and Medicaid funding, alongside the implementation of strict federal work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents.

This policy blueprint outlines a comprehensive municipal strategy for the 2027–2031 mayoral term designed to dismantle the root causes of nutritional inequity. By shifting the municipal paradigm away from a reliance on extractive, for-profit grocery chains and instead investing in non-profit retail models, worker-owned cooperatives, aggressive land-disposition strategies, and immediate community-based micro-economies, the District can establish a resilient, self-sovereign food system.

## The Anatomy of Spatial Injustice: Mapping the Grocery Gap

To address the nutritional crisis effectively, municipal policy must target the intersecting failures of economic, geographic, and racial policies that perpetuate wealth extraction. The geography of hunger in the District maps directly onto historical patterns of racial capitalism.

### The Cost-of-Living Squeeze and Wage Stagnation

The immediate driver of food insecurity is the inability of working-class households to absorb the rising costs of basic necessities. Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) data reveals a rapidly growing population of residents who earn above the federal poverty level but remain entirely unable to afford a basic household budget in one of the nation's most expensive cities.

For these families, the monthly budget is a series of impossible compromises between rent, utility payments, medical care, and groceries. With grocery prices driven upward by corporate profit-taking and global supply chain volatility, the flatlining of real wages in low-income sectors has eroded the financial resilience of District families, leading to spikes in consumer debt and hardship withdrawals from retirement funds.

### Systemic Disinvestment and the Grocery Gap

The concentration of food insecurity in Wards 7 and 8 is the direct legacy of exclusionary banking and retail practices that have historically starved Black neighborhoods of capital. This disinvestment has created a self-perpetuating cycle where a lack of physical grocery infrastructure leads to poor metabolic health outcomes, which in turn reduces workforce participation and further discourages private investment.

A rigorous analysis of full-service grocery store density—defined as establishments dedicating at least 50 percent of their square footage, or a minimum of 6,000 square feet, to food products for home consumption—reveals a stark "grocery gap". In 2025, while the District's total inventory of full-service stores reached 80, this growth was concentrated almost exclusively in high-income wards. Ward 3 alone boasts 17 full-service stores serving a population of roughly 81,000, while Wards 7 and 8, which house a combined population of approximately 150,000 residents, possess only three and four stores respectively.

Metric	Ward 3 (Affluent)	Ward 7 (East of River)	Ward 8 (East of River)
Median Household Income	\$147,968	\$49,814	\$45,598
Poverty Rate (2025)	6.78%	22.4%	26.8%
Full-Service Grocery Stores (2025)	17	3	4
Population Share Below 185% FPL	Low	High	Very High

Socio-Economic Indicators by Ward (2024–2025)

### Transit Barriers and Time Poverty

For residents east of the Anacostia River, the physical absence of retail stores is compounded by severe transit inequities. Ward 2 is serviced by five Metro stations spanning four different transit lines, whereas Wards 7 and 8 combined possess only five stations, each limited to a single transit line.

This lack of geographic connectivity forces residents who do not own personal vehicles to spend significant portions of their day navigating public transit simply to access fresh produce.

The resulting "time poverty"—wherein a basic grocery trip requires a multi-hour round trip—functions as a major structural barrier to maintaining nutritional health, disproportionately penalizing working-class Black families who are already juggling multiple employment commitments.

## A Comparative Critique of Municipal Leadership: The Pitfalls of Reformism and Market Reliance

The 2027 mayoral election presents District voters with distinct approaches to municipal governance. To understand the superiority of the proposed blueprint, it must be contrasted with the platforms of the two leading councilmembers running for the executive office, analyzed here without direct naming.

### The Limits of Progressive Reformism

The progressive challenger, a self-described democratic socialist representing Ward 4, has centered her platform on labor pathways, universal childcare, and public-private partnerships to establish publicly owned grocery stores. While this platform correctly identifies the necessity of public capital, its structural flaw lies in its operational timeline and complexity. Constructing and operating a municipal, publicly owned retail chain from the ground up involves a steep administrative learning curve, regulatory hurdles, and long-term development timelines.

Critics from local food security organizations have noted that these proposals are "pie in the sky" because they fail to address the immediate, acute hunger experienced by families today. Relying solely on future brick-and-mortar municipal stores offers no relief to a family struggling to put food on the table tonight.

Furthermore, her ambitious housing target of constructing 72,000 units in five years has been critiqued by municipal planners as fiscally unrealistic given the historic funding capacity of the Housing Production Trust Fund, which at its peak only supported the construction of approximately 5,500 units annually.

### The Failures of Neoliberal Market Reliance

The moderate alternative, a long-serving Ward 7 representative who previously chaired the Committee on Business and Economic Development, champions an approach focused on business deregulation, private developer incentives, and stadium-centered economic

development. This candidate proposes bringing grocery stores to underserved wards by integrating retail incentives into major municipal projects, such as the redevelopment of the old RFK Stadium campus, and points to past involvement in bringing a Lidl to Skyland Town Center.

This developer-first philosophy relies entirely on subsidizing the private sector to solve public infrastructure crises, a strategy that history has shown to be highly unreliable. For example, during this candidate’s lengthy tenure chairing the economic development committee, projects like the Capitol Gateway Marketplace —which was promised to bring a Giant grocery store to Ward 7—stalled indefinitely after corporate partners withdrew, leaving residents with a vacant lot and "coming soon" signs. Furthermore, tying grocery access to massive stadium redevelopments pushes actual food delivery at least five years into the future.

This market-dependent model fails because private, for-profit grocery chains operating on thin margins will always prioritize affluent neighborhoods and abandon low-income areas when profit projections fluctuate, as demonstrated by Walmart’s sudden withdrawal from Ward 7 in 2016. He has also faced sharp criticism for his oversight of the District’s disastrous sports betting contract, which resulted in millions of dollars in lost municipal revenue and administrative waste.

Policy Area	Moderate Representative's Platform	Progressive Challenger's Platform	Proposed Sovereignty First Blueprint
Grocery Infrastructure	Developer incentives; stadium-adjacent retail (RFK)	Publicly owned grocery stores via public-private partnerships	De-commodified public utility; worker-owned co-ops; eminent domain land reclamation
Housing Production	12,000 units by 2030; streamlined permitting and deregulation	72,000 units in 5 years; Green New Deal public housing	45,000 deeply affordable municipal units by 2031 co-located with food hubs

<b>Immediate Relief</b>	Minimal; relies on trickle -down commercial development	Moderate; limited primarily to standard institutional food improvements	High; immediate scaling of Produce Rx, street vending hubs, and cottage food networks
<b>Public Safety &amp; Youth</b>	Punitive curfews; doubling police recruitment bonuses for 1,000 officers	Opposes curfews; raises concerns over federal agency over-policing of Black youth	DC Young Adult Corps; paid community service pathways in urban agriculture
<b>Economic Development</b>	Private sector subsidies; corporate tax concessions	Labor-centric support; small business regulatory relief	Democratic worker -ownership; cooperative wealth building; closed loop local food economies

Comparative Analysis of Mayoral Platforms and Strategies

## The Superiority of the Sovereignty First Blueprint

The proposed plan is superior to both competitor models because it rejects the false binary of long-term public development versus extractive private subsidies. Instead, this blueprint integrates immediate, community -led economic relief with aggressive, no n-market land reclamation.

Rather than waiting five years for a stadium development or a municipal grocery startup to clear regulatory hurdles, this plan immediately activates existing neighborhood micro - economies. By legalizing and financially backing street vendors, expanding cottage food wholesale networks, and directly scaling clinical "Produce Rx" debit cards to Medicaid recipients, the plan injects immediate nutritional purchasing power directly into communities east of the River.

Simultaneously, the plan utilizes the District’s executive authority to seize stalled commercial properties via eminent domain and hand them over to worker -owned cooperatives and non - profit operators. This ensures that public dollars build community wealth rather than corporate

profit, creating a highly resilient and immediate food system.

## The Sovereignty First Proposal: Operationalizing Democratic Food Systems

The proposed municipal plan operates on three concurrent timelines to ensure that immediate nutritional deprivation is resolved while permanent, democratic infrastructure is established.

### Tier I: Immediate Metabolic Relief (The "Right Now" Strategy)

To counter the immediate "hunger cliff" caused by federal benefit cuts and inflation, the District will bypass traditional brick-and-mortar construction by utilizing decentralized, clinical, and community-led distribution networks.

#### Clinical Produce Rx Scaling

The District will institutionalize and fund the expansion of the clinical "Produce Rx" model in partnership with Medicaid managed care organizations and local community health networks, including Bread for the City, Community of Hope, and Unity Health Care. Healthcare providers will directly prescribe fresh fruits and vegetables to Medicaid-enrolled residents experiencing or at risk of diet-related chronic illnesses (such as diabetes and hypertension).

Participants will receive preloaded debit cards providing \$80 to \$120 monthly to purchase fresh produce. Crucially, the program's retail network will be expanded beyond major supermarkets to include mobile markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) drop-offs, and local corner stores in Wards 7 and 8. This clinical intervention improves long-term health outcomes while immediately subsidizing the purchasing power of low-income families.

#### Decriminalized Street Vending and Transit Food Hubs

The District will fully fund and implement the Street Vendor Advancement Amendment Act of 2023. Street vending is an economic lifeline for entrepreneurial residents of color who are excluded from traditional capital markets. By removing police from business licensing enforcement and transferring authority to the Department of Licensing and Consumer Protection, the District will eliminate the punitive over-policing of working-class entrepreneurs.

The District will establish micro-vending zones at key transit hubs east of the river, providing street vendors with subsidized, standardized mobile carts equipped to store and sell fresh produce and healthy prepared foods. This immediately transforms transit deserts into fresh

food access points, resolving "time poverty" for commuters.

## **Cottage Food wholesale and Hyper -Local Economics**

Under the Certificate of Need Improvement Amendment Act of 2025, the District removed the historical \$25,000 revenue cap on cottage food businesses and legalized the wholesale of home-produced, shelf-stable foods directly to retail establishments. The District will establish a \$5 million Cottage Food Micro-Grant Program to assist home-based entrepreneurs in Wards 7 and 8 in obtaining their Certified Food Protection Manager credentials, completing mandatory home occupancy permits, and securing commercial-grade packaging. By integrating these home-grown enterprises into the retail supply chains of neighborhood corner stores, the District will build localized, self-sustaining circular economies that keep community wealth within the neighborhood.

## **Tier II: Aggressive Site Activation and Structural Land Reform**

The District must stop waiting for corporate developers to fulfill empty promises. The municipal plan will deploy aggressive executive land-use strategies to reclaim redlined properties.

- **Capitol Gateway Marketplace (Ward 7):** This strategic site has remained vacant since Walmart withdrew in 2016. The District will exercise its eminent domain authority to seize the property, breaking a commercial stalemate that would otherwise prevent development until 2037. Once acquired, the land will be transferred to a community land trust to build a 55,000-square-foot non-profit retail facility, placing over 10,700 residents within a mile of fresh food.
- **Fletcher -Johnson Site (Ward 7):** The District will prioritize the immediate redevelopment of this 15-acre, government-owned property. The master plan will feature over 800 units of deeply affordable housing co-located with a transit-accessible, community-owned cooperative grocery store.
- **Sycamore & Oak (Ward 8):** Building upon the success of the interim retail village at St. Elizabeths East, the District will construct a permanent 30,000-square-foot retail center. This site will feature a cooperative grocery store and a "Chefs-in-Residence" incubator, providing subsidized commercial kitchen space and business training for Black food entrepreneurs.

## Tier III: Scaled Cooperative and Non -Profit Retail Ecosystems

Traditional, profit -maximizing supermarkets fail in low-income neighborhoods because their business model requires high profit margins that working -class communities cannot sustain. The District will establish a resilient retail infrastructure by scaling non-market models.

### The Non-Profit Grocery Model

Replicating the successful Daily Table model, the District will charter municipal, non-profit grocery stores in Wards 7 and 8. By sourcing high-quality, excess wholesome food directly from regional agricultural producers and manufacturers, these stores can retail fresh produce and pantry staples at 30 to 50 percent less than commercial chains.

To directly compete with predatory fast -food outlets, each non -profit location will feature an on-site kitchen preparing healthy, ready -to-eat meals priced affordably. Operating on a break-even, non-profit basis, this model ensures that public subsidies are converted entirely into lower food prices for consumers rather than corporate dividends.

### Worker -Owner Cooperatives

The District will provide matching capital grants to establish worker -owned cooperative grocery stores, modeled on the Mandela Grocery Co -op. By structured investment in cooperative associations, the District ensures that store employees and neighborhood residents are the literal owners of the enterprise.

Cooperatives are structurally resilient to market downturns because their primary mandate is community service and employment preservation rather than shareholder extraction. These co-ops will implement a permanent 50 percent point -of-sale discount for SNAP and WIC recipients on all healthy, local produce.

### Scaling the Nourish DC Collaborative

To support existing small-scale merchants, the District will double its financial commitment to the Nourish DC Collaborative, deploying \$50 million in low-interest loans, technical assistance, and capital grants. This funding will prioritize the "Keeping It Cool" grant program, which subsidizes the installation of commercial refrigeration and cold storage in local corner stores and micro-grocers. By focusing on BIPOC- and women-owned entities (such as EightFold Farms and the Fresh Food Factory Market), the program ensures that the expansion of food infrastructure directly advances racial wealth equity.

## Resolving Debate Clashes and Missed Structural Opportunities

The televised mayoral debates highlighted critical administrative and social policy clashes. The proposed plan integrates these debates into a unified policy framework, correcting the oversight of both leading candidates.

### Public Safety, Youth Engagement, and the Young Adult Corps

A central debate clash focused on the implementation of youth curfews. The moderate opponent proposed expanding punitive 8 p.m. teen curfew zones, doubling police recruitment bonuses to hire 1,000 new officers, and coordinating policing with federal agencies. The progressive challenger strongly opposed these measures, warning that surging federal law enforcement and the National Guard into the District creates a severe risk of de-escalation failures and physical harm to Black youth.

The proposed plan resolves this impasse by treating public safety and public health as deeply interconnected, bypassing punitive policing in favor of systemic economic inclusion. Rather than criminalizing youth presence on the streets, the District will pass and fund the **DC Young Adult Corps Act**. This legislation will establish a paid, fulltime community and civic service pathway for District young adults aged 17 to 24.

Corps members will be placed in year-long, full-time paid positions within municipal agencies, local non-profits, urban agriculture sites, and cooperative food hubs. Members will lead community grocery distributions, manage urban orchards, staff mobile market trucks, and run peer-to-peer nutritional education programs.

Upon completion of their service year, participants will receive a \$3,000 transition award to support educational or career advancement. This creates a robust municipal workforce pipeline, provides immediate livable wages, and naturally reduces street violence by engaging young adults in meaningful, well-compensated neighborhood improvement.

### The Sports Betting Contract and Fiscal Accountability

The debates also exposed the financial failures of the District's past economic development initiatives. The progressive challenger correctly attacked the moderate opponent for overseeing a highly controversial, exclusive sports betting contract that cost the District millions in lost revenues and administrative waste.

The proposed blueprint establishes a framework of strict fiscal accountability. Rather than outsourcing public utilities and financial services to corporate monopolies through closed-door deals, this plan mandates that all municipal economic development agreements contain clear public-benefit clauses. Any public land disposition or financial subsidy will require reciprocal, legally binding agreements to guarantee living wages, union labor peace, and dedicated retail space for non-profit or cooperative food access points.

## Co-Locating Healthcare and Nutritional Infrastructure

A critical failure highlighted in the debates was the premature ribbon-cutting at Cedar Hill Hospital, which left residents frustrated with incomplete healthcare services and lack of access. The proposed plan addresses this disconnect by directly co-locating healthcare delivery with nutritional access.

The District will integrate the "Produce Rx" clinical enrollment system directly into public facilities and underutilized District assets. Community health clinics, maternal health centers, and mobile health vans will serve as one-stop hubs where residents can receive primary care, enroll in Medicaid, register for WIC, and receive preloaded produce prescription debit cards. This co-location model treats food as medicine, ensuring that healthcare infrastructure and metabolic nutrition are delivered as a unified public service.

## Funding the Democratic Transition: Closing Corporate Loopholes and Reallocating Capital

Achieving a systemic overhaul of the District's food infrastructure requires a highly diversified capital strategy that does not burden working-class families. The total program budget is projected at \$1.5 billion over the 2027–2031 mayoral term, funded through innovative municipal tax reforms, internal cost savings, and federal capital matches.

### The Business Activity Tax (BAT)

The primary funding engine for this progressive transformation is the implementation of the **Business Activity Tax (BAT)**. Under current District law, a significant tax loophole exists for massive unincorporated professional services partnerships —such as elite lobbying firms, corporate consultancies, and national law firms —that operate in D.C. but are owned by partners residing in Maryland or Virginia. Because federal law prevents the District from taxing non-resident personal income directly, these out-of-state partners currently pay little to no tax on the massive profits they extract from their D.C. operations.

The BAT closes this loophole by taxing the business entity itself on its D.C.-derived activity, rather than the individual non-resident partners. This tax reform is estimated to generate **\$500 million in new municipal revenue annually**. Crucially, this revenue is raised without imposing any new taxes on the District's working-class families, middle-class households, or locally owned small businesses.

## Internal Procurement Savings and the CFPF

The District currently spends approximately \$62 million annually on food purchases across various public agencies, including public schools, correctional facilities, and emergency shelters. To maximize these public dollars, the District will pass the **Food Policy Council Procurement Amendment Act**.

This legislation will consolidate all agency food purchasing under a unified procurement framework mandated to source nutrition from regional Black-owned, cooperative, and sustainable farms, thereby keeping public capital within the local economy.

Furthermore, the District will construct a state-of-the-art **Central Food Processing Facility (CFPF)**. By centralizing raw ingredient purchasing, processing, and meal preparation for all municipal institutions, the CFPF will utilize economies of scale to improve food quality while saving the District **\$25 million annually in institutional meal costs**. These administrative savings will be directly reinvested into the Food Access Fund.

## The Food Access Fund (FAF) and Real Estate Recordation Taxes

The Food Access Fund (FAF) has demonstrated success by distributing \$12.7 million in targeted grants to local businesses east of the river. The District will scale the FAF to **\$75 million per annum**. This expansion will be funded by reallocating a portion of the District's commercial real estate recordation taxes, redirecting a fraction of the wealth generated by downtown development to repair the food infrastructure of historically disinvested wards.

## Federal Capital and Tax Credit Leveraging

The District will aggressively leverage federal and private matching capital to amplify its local investments:

- **New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC):** The District will allocate municipal NMTC capacity to provide a 20 to 25 percent equity boost to cooperative and non-profit retail construction projects in eligible low-income census tracts.
- **Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI):** The District will secure matching federal HFFI

grants and technical assistance to support SNAP-eligible, community -owned retail startups.

- **Public-Private Matching Funds:** In partnership with regional philanthropic institutions and food banks, the District will secure \$10 million in private matches to build regional cold-storage hubs, reducing supply chain costs for independent micro -grocers.

Funding Source	Annual Projected Revenue / Savings	Allocation Target
Business Activity Tax (BAT)	\$500,000,000	Co-op capitalization, non-profit retail startup, Produce Rx scaling
Real Estate Recordation Tax Reallocation	\$75,000,000	Food Access Fund (FAF) expansion, corner store cooling grants
Central Food Processing Facility (CFPF) Savings	\$25,000,000	Reinvested directly into urban agriculture lease subsidies and mobile markets
Federal HFFI and NMTC Leveraging	\$15,000,000	Large-scale site acquisition and eminent domain physical redevelopments
<b>Total Annual Food Sovereignty Budget</b>	<b>\$615,000,000</b>	<b>Comprehensive implementation of the 2027–2031 Blueprint</b>

The Food Sovereignty Funding Architecture (2027–2031)