

Hartford, Retail & Consumers

Living in Downtown Hartford, Shopping in the Suburbs

— Laura Arman, 9.1.2024



Outside Greenway Market in downtown Hartford. Photo credit: CT Examiner

HARTFORD — Jody and Ronald Morneault, residents of downtown Hartford, drive to either West Hartford, East Hartford or Glastonbury to get their groceries.

If you live downtown, you're five to 10 minutes by car from a number of large grocery stores, said Ronald. If you don't own a car, it's a 40-minute bus ride.

The roughly 18 square miles of downtown Hartford has had success in recent years attracting a population of young single professionals. Michael Freimuth, executive director of the **Capital Region Development Authority**, said most people living in the downtown area were between the ages of 25 and 40, with incomes between \$75,000 and \$100,000.

The area currently houses about 5,100 residents, and expects to add another 1,500 to 2,400 people in the next 2 to 3 years, according to Freimuth.

Melissa Meleson, one of the board members of Hartford's Chamber of Commerce, told CT Examiner with all the expected residents coming in, there is a growing need for a full-service grocery store – one that offers meat, fish, and deli and floral departments, in addition to packaged goods.

Ben Dubow, the Executive Director of Forge City Works and the chairperson of the Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy, told CT Examiner that historically downtown Hartford has not had a full-service grocery store.

Thirteen years ago, the City of Hartford financed about \$400,000 to open a small “footprint market” downtown with produce and packaged goods. It **opened its doors** in March 2011, at Hartford 21 Apartment in Asylum Street.

But the store struggled to attract a consistent base of customers in its few months in business, and **closed** 6 months later in September, with the owners saying the closure was temporary pending a reworking of their

business plan.

It never reopened.

Downtown Hartford, according Dubow, is a food swamp. “There’s access to food, but it’s just not high quality – it’s not fresh food,” he said.

The Morneaults, who have been living in downtown Hartford for decades, said they would “love to have a [full-service grocery store] downtown,” but expressed doubt that would ever happen.

For now, the closest store in the area is another small, 2200-square foot market called The Greenway Market in Asylum Street. The store sells basic produce from eggs, fruits, vegetables, and seasonings and packaged meals and products.

“[The store] is for small things,” Sukjinder Ghotra, the owner of Greenway, told CT Examiner.

Greenway Market opened independently in 2016, with no funding from the city.

Ghotra said he invested \$150,000 out of pocket to open Greenway. And when it first opened, his business was performing well – they had a sandwich bar and a juice bar to make fresh juice which was usually packed over lunch.

But that all changed after COVID.

“Now, nobody comes over here,” Ghotra said. “[It] used to be [that at] lunch time over here [there] was a big line for the sandwiches [and juices].”

Pre-COVID, Greenway employed a staff of five – three full-time, and two

part-time workers. The store currently has only one full-time employee and is struggling to pay its electricity bills.

Hybrid and remote work, Gothra said, have hit them hard — when people work from home, they don't come to shop at their market.

The percentage of people working remotely **tripled** since the pandemic in Hartford alone. In 2018, three percent of Hartford's workforce worked remotely, in 2022, the figure increased to nine percent.

In Greater Hartford — which employs more than 627,000 workers in Hartford, East Hartford, West Hartford and its surrounding towns — 16.6% of the workforce works **remotely**, slightly higher than the national average.

“I don't think Hartford's office working environment, or any city's office working environment, is going back to where it was pre-covid,” Jordan Polon, the executive director of Hartford Business Improvement District told CT Examiner. “Based on conversations with our colleagues in the International Downtown Association, this is a pervasive shift throughout most of North America, and many of us are working on ways for urban commercial centers to reinvent themselves as more balanced neighborhoods.”

Gothra said Greenway's profit dropped by 60 percent between 2021 and 2024, and the market is struggling to survive.

Matt Hart, the executive director of Capitol Region Council of Government, told CT Examiner if downtown Hartford were to open a full-service grocery store, it most likely would require some level of public assistance at first.

“The grocery stores have a set of metrics that they're looking to meet, and that's why I think structuring this as some type of public-private

partnership could help address those private sector considerations and needs,” Hart said.

Dubow and Hart both said Downtown Hartford has what it takes to attract a full-service grocery store: a sizable population, residents’ shopping habits, disposable income, a parking lot – “arguably too much parking, or more than it needs,” Hart said.

Downtown Hartford has **45 parking lots and car garages** and the city as a whole has a population of 120,000 residents – which Dubow and Hart say are enough to demonstrate the area’s suitability for a store.

“I think there’s a need for both ... local, small neighborhood markets as well as larger full service one – I think we need both,” Dubow said.

The office of the Mayor of Hartford said in a statement to CT Examiner the “administration remains committed to working intentionally to bring grocery stores to our City and provide healthy food options for our residents,” but did not offer any concrete suggestions for how this would occur.

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