

Resolution No. 240-2026**By Council Members:** Starr, Shah and Griffin

An emergency resolution supporting and urging the Ohio General Assembly to enact House Bill 543 to establish the Food Desert Elimination Grant Program; and affirming the City of Cleveland's commitment to expanding access to healthy, affordable food.

WHEREAS, Ohio House Bill 543 proposes the creation of the Food Desert Elimination Grant Program within the Ohio Department of Development to support small and independent retailers in offering fresh and nutritious food options in underserved communities; and

WHEREAS, the bill is sponsored by Representatives Josh Williams and Terrence Upchurch, demonstrating bipartisan recognition that access to healthy food is both a public health and economic priority; and

WHEREAS, more than 1.3 million Ohioans live in communities classified as food deserts, and approximately 225,000 of those residents lack access to a vehicle, limiting their ability to travel to full-service grocery stores; and

WHEREAS, the Ohio Association of Community Action reports that 67 counties in Ohio contain at least one food desert, with many located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods; and

WHEREAS, food deserts are defined by the Ohio Association of Community Action as neighborhoods lacking sufficient access to affordable and nutritious food, often forcing residents to rely on convenience stores, dollar stores, gas stations, or fast-food establishments as their primary food sources; and

WHEREAS, research demonstrates that limited access to healthy food contributes to increased rates of diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and other diet-related illnesses, disproportionately affecting children and compounding long-term health disparities; and

WHEREAS, diet-related illness imposes significant financial burdens on families, health systems, and taxpayers, with national healthcare and insurance costs associated with preventable chronic disease reaching into the trillions of dollars annually; and

WHEREAS, House Bill 543 would provide annual grants of up to \$15,000 per participating retailer, supported by an initial \$200,000 program fund, to reduce the financial risk associated with stocking perishable fresh foods that may otherwise spoil; and

WHEREAS, the legislation is designed as a “proof of concept” initiative focused on empowering existing neighborhood retailers — including small grocery stores, convenience stores, and gas stations — rather than attempting to subsidize large corporate grocery chains; and

WHEREAS, the bill requires participating stores to submit quarterly reporting data regarding funding received and healthy food inventory outcomes, ensuring transparency, accountability, and measurable program evaluation; and

WHEREAS, the proposal complements, rather than duplicates, federal nutrition programs such as SNAP, by expanding the availability of healthy options that residents may purchase using existing benefits; and

WHEREAS, members of the Ohio House Community Revitalization Committee have discussed opportunities to strengthen the bill by encouraging partnerships with Ohio farmers and the state’s agricultural sector, potentially boosting local food production and small business growth; and

WHEREAS, the City of Cleveland contains neighborhoods historically identified as food deserts, where residents face structural barriers to accessing fresh produce and healthy groceries, and where improving food access aligns with the City’s public health, workforce, and community revitalization goals; and

WHEREAS, access to healthy, affordable food is a foundational component of neighborhood stability, educational attainment, workforce readiness, and economic mobility; and

WHEREAS, this Council encourages the Ohio General Assembly to consider expanding funding for the program, if proven effective, and to incorporate partnerships with Ohio’s agricultural community to strengthen local food systems; and

WHEREAS, that this Council affirms its commitment to working collaboratively with state partners, local retailers, community development corporations, and public health agencies to eliminate food deserts in Cleveland neighborhoods; and

WHEREAS, this resolution constitutes an emergency measure for the immediate preservation of public peace, property, health or safety; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF CLEVELAND:

Section 1. That this Council supports and urges the Ohio General Assembly to enact House Bill 543 to establish the Food Desert Elimination Grant Program within the Ohio Department of Development; and affirms the City of Cleveland’s commitment to expanding access to healthy, affordable food.

Section 2. That the Clerk of Council is directed to transmit copies of this resolution to Governor Mike DeWine, Matt Huffman, Speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives,

Rob McColley, President of the Ohio Senate, and members of the Cleveland delegation to the Ohio General Assembly.

Section 3. That this resolution is hereby declared to be an emergency measure and, provided it receives the affirmative vote of two-thirds of all the members elected to Council, it shall take effect and be in force immediately upon its adoption and approval by the Mayor; otherwise, it shall take effect and be in force from and after the earliest period allowed by law.

Passed March 2, 2026.

Effective March 4, 2026.