

To: City of Providence, Department of Planning and Development
From: Roderick Taylor, Rappaport Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School
Date: June 2024
RE: An Amenity Desert Analysis of the Former Urban League Site

The former [Urban League of Rhode Island \(ULRI\) site](#), located at 246 Prairie Ave, is facing uncertainty.¹ The ambiguity regarding the site's future underscores the ongoing challenges faced by the surrounding community, which already suffers from limited access to several amenities. This phenomenon, known as an amenity desert, refers to areas that lack essential public amenities and services. The absence of these amenities can negatively impact the quality of life for residents, contributing to issues such as poor health outcomes, limited educational opportunities, and social isolation.² Amenity deserts often disproportionately affect low-income and communities of color, exacerbating social and economic inequalities.³

The following amenity desert analysis focuses on the availability of grocery stores, parks, healthcare facilities, schools, public transportation, libraries, childcare centers, pharmacies, banks, and housing options. These amenities are important for maintaining quality of life and ensuring equitable access to essential services. While this analysis provides a snapshot of the current state, it's important to note that many other types of community amenities, such as recreational facilities and cultural institutions, were not included in this analysis. A Census-tract-level demographic analysis is also not included. Therefore, the results should be viewed within the context of these limitations, recognizing that a comprehensive assessment would require a broader scope and additional time commitments.

Grocery Stores

Food deserts are regions where residents lack easy access to grocery stores. In urban settings, these are areas where people must travel more than a mile to reach a grocery store, while in rural areas, the distance is typically more than 10 miles. This lack of accessibility can lead to significant challenges in obtaining fresh and healthy food, contributing to poor dietary habits and related health issues. Identifying and addressing food deserts is crucial for promoting public health and ensuring equitable access to nutritious food.⁴

In the area around the ULRI site, there are a few grocery stores within a relatively close distance, though access varies by location. [America's Food Basket](#), situated 0.8 miles southwest of the site, is within an 18-minute walking distance. [Urban Greens Co-op Market](#) is about 1 mile northwest of the site, offering another nearby option. However, both these stores are located to the west, meaning residents on the east side of the site face greater difficulties in accessing grocery stores. Despite the presence of many small convenience near the site, these do not meet the USDA's definition of a grocery store,⁵ emphasizing the need for more comprehensive grocery options in the area.⁶

Parks

Parks and recreational facilities are essential for promoting physical activity, community engagement, and mental well-being. Ideally, residents should have access to a park within a 10-minute walk, roughly half a mile.⁷ Around the ULRI site, there are several small parks within this distance, including [Peace & Plenty Park](#) and [Pearl Street Park](#). These spaces provide vital recreational opportunities and contribute to the overall quality of life for local residents.

However, when it comes to more fully equipped parks with amenities such as public restrooms, water fountains, and picnic areas, residents need to travel further. [Roger Williams Park](#), whose center located 2.2 miles south of the ULRI site, is the nearest park offering these facilities. The disparity in access to comprehensive park amenities highlights the need for more developed recreational spaces closer to the site to ensure all residents can easily enjoy the full range of park services.

Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services is a critical component of a community's well-being. In urban areas, a healthcare desert is defined by a lack of healthcare facilities within a 5 radius. Around the ULRI site, [Rhode Island Hospital](#) is in close proximity, ensuring that residents have access to essential medical services. This proximity is crucial for providing timely and efficient healthcare, reducing travel time, and improving overall health outcomes.

Despite the presence of a large healthcare center, it is important to assess the range and quality of services offered to ensure they meet the community's needs.⁸ Addressing any gaps in service availability or specialty care is essential for maintaining a robust healthcare infrastructure.

Schools

The accessibility of educational institutions is another important aspect of community amenities. Around the ULRI site, there are numerous public, private, and charter schools at various educational levels. This variety provides families with options and contributes to a supportive educational environment for children.

Ensuring that schools are within a reasonable distance is essential for minimizing travel time and enhancing students' learning experiences. While the presence of multiple schools nearby is advantageous, it is also important to consider the quality of these institutions and their capacity to accommodate the local population.⁹ Ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all students is fundamental for fostering a thriving community.¹⁰

Public Transportation

Public transportation is vital for enabling mobility and access to essential services. Around the ULRI site, there are many bus stops, providing some level of public transit access to the community. These stops facilitate movement within the city and connect residents to various amenities and services.

However, the distribution of public transportation access is not uniform across the site. Residents on the eastern side may face longer walks to reach the nearest bus stops, highlighting a need for more evenly distributed transit options. In addition, the [Providence Amtrak/MBTA stop](#) is roughly 2 miles away. Improving public transportation infrastructure and accessibility can significantly enhance mobility and reduce transportation-related challenges for residents.

Libraries

Libraries play a crucial role in providing access to information, educational resources, and community programs. Around the ULRI site, there are two main libraries: [Knight Memorial Library](#)

and [South Providence Library](#). These institutions offer valuable resources and serve as community hubs for learning and engagement.

Childcare Centers

The availability of childcare centers is an important element of community amenities, significantly impacting the lives of families and the development of young children. Around the ULRI site, several childcare centers provide essential services to the community. [Pasito Kids Learning Center](#) is located to the west, [Bright Horizons at Rhode Island Hospital](#) is situated to the north, and [Love 4 All Learning Center](#) lies to the east. These centers offer various programs that support early childhood development, catering to the diverse needs of families in the area.

While the presence of multiple childcare centers nearby is advantageous, it is equally important to assess the quality of these facilities and their capacity to serve the local population. Providing equitable access to high-quality childcare is fundamental for fostering a supportive and thriving community, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to benefit from early education and care.¹¹

Pharmacies

Access to pharmacies is crucial for the availability of medications and essential health services. Around the ULRI site, there is one [Walgreens](#) located to the south. The limited number of pharmacies in the immediate vicinity suggests a potential gap in service availability, particularly for those who may find it challenging to travel to this single location. Expanding the number of pharmacies or enhancing transportation options to existing ones could improve access to necessary medications and health services for the community.

Banks

Banking services are essential for financial stability and economic development. Around the ULRI site, there are two banks: [HarborOne Bank](#) to the northeast and [Citizens Bank](#) to the northwest. The distribution of these banks indicates that some residents may face longer travel times to access banking services. Improving the availability of banking services, either through additional bank branches or improved financial service accessibility, could support economic stability and growth within the community.

Housing Availability

The availability of homes for [sale](#) and [rent](#) around the ULRI site is very limited, highlighting a critical issue in housing accessibility. This scarcity can exacerbate affordability issues and limit options for current and prospective residents. By increasing the availability of housing, the community can better accommodate its population and support overall economic and social well-being.

Discussion

The amenity desert analysis around the former ULRI site reveals disparities in the availability of essential services. While there are grocery stores, parks, healthcare facilities, schools, and public

transportation options nearby, their distribution is uneven, impacting residents' access to these amenities. For instance, the east side of the site lacks grocery stores, and local parks lack comprehensive amenities, requiring residents to travel further for fully equipped recreational spaces. Despite the proximity to Rhode Island Hospital, there is a need to assess the range and quality of healthcare services. Similarly, while there are various educational institutions, their quality and capacity to serve the local population need evaluation.

In addition to these disparities, there are also gaps in access to pharmacies and banking services. With only one Walgreens to the south, residents may face challenges in accessing medications and health products. Banking options are limited to HarborOne Bank in the northeast and Citizens Bank in the northwest, leading to potential inconvenience for some residents. Furthermore, the limited availability of homes for sale and rent exacerbates housing accessibility issues.

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- ¹ “Providence to acquire former Urban League headquarters,” WPRO News, December 19, 2022, <https://www.997wpro.com/2022/12/19/providence-to-acquire-former-urban-league-headquarters/>.
- ² “Education as a Social Determinant of Health,” Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, January 27, 2021, <https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/social-determinant-of-health-education-is-crucial/>; “Social Isolation and Loneliness,” World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>; Brendan G Carr et al, “Disparities in access to trauma care in the United States: A population-based analysis,” National Library of Medicine, February 2017, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28069138/>; “Access to Education: The Impact Of Inequality On Education,” Gray Group International, June 1, 2024, <https://www.graygrouppintl.com/blog/access-to-education>.
- ³ “Too many Black Americans live in food deserts,” McKinsey & Company, September 9, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/chart-of-the-day/too-many-black-americans-live-in-food-deserts>; “Income inequality affects our children’s educational opportunities,” Washington Center for Equitable Growth, September 1, 2014, <https://equitablegrowth.org/income-inequality-affects-our-childrens-educational-opportunities/>; Noelle Kwan, “The Impact of Pharmacy Deserts,” US Pharmacist, April 18, 2024, <https://www.uspharmacist.com/article/the-impact-of-pharmacy-deserts>; Ronda Chapman et al, “Parks and an Equitable Recovery,” Trust for Public Land, May 27, 2021, <https://www.tpl.org/parks-and-an-equitable-recovery-parkscore-report>.
- ⁴ “Food Access Research Atlas,” USDA Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/>.
- ⁵ The USDA defines a grocery store as a retail store that offers a wide selection of all four staple food categories: fresh meat and poultry, dairy, dry and packaged foods, and frozen foods. To meet this definition, the store must have at least \$2 million in annual sales and must contain all the major food departments typically found in a traditional supermarket. For more information, see: “Food Access Research Atlas,” USDA Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/>.
- ⁶ To see all of the grocery stores in South Providence, as defined by the USDA, see: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?layers=a228b08057d94374a0cf0b077be4c480>.
- ⁷ The standard for park access is that residents should ideally have access to a park within a 10-minute walk, which is approximately half a mile. This guideline is supported by various organizations, including The Trust for Public Land and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), which advocate for equitable park access to enhance community health and well-being. For more information, see: “Park Access,” National Recreation and Park Association, <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/park-access/>.
- ⁸ “Quality of Care,” World Health Organization, https://www.who.int/health-topics/quality-of-care#tab=tab_1.
- ⁹ “What is Student Experience and Why is it Important,” New Metrics, <https://newmetrics.net/insights/what-is-student-experience-and-why-is-it-important/>; Nina Parrish, “Providing Rich Educational Experiences for All Students,” Edutopia, July 17, 2019, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/providing-rich-educational-experiences-all-students>.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ For more information, see: “Defining and Recognizing High-Quality Early Learning Programs: NAEYC’s 10 Accreditation Standards,” National Association for the Education of Young Children, <https://www.naeyc.org/defining-recognizing-high-quality-early-learning-programs>; “Brain Architecture,” Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>; “Exploring Quality, Access, and Funding in Early Care and Education,” Urban Institute, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/center-labor-human-services-and-population/projects/exploring-quality-access-and-funding-early-care-and-education>.