

The Appalling Elitism of Dollar Store Bans

Should city governments dictate where you can shop for food? If your neighbors see a need for a store, and happily patronize it, should outsiders shut down that option?

These are the battle lines of the emerging movement against dollar stores. [Tulsa, Oklahoma](#), [Mesquite, Texas](#), [DeKalb County, Georgia](#), [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), and other municipalities nationwide are trying to limit the number of dollar stores that can serve their population.

The people who actually shop at dollar stores love them. The most frequent customers are seniors on fixed incomes, cash-strapped students, and busy parents. If you don't have a car or access to public transit, there's probably one within five miles of your house. If you drive, there's a dollar store on your way to just about anywhere.

In a compact space, dollar stores stock household staples like toothpaste, toilet paper, soap, and pet supplies at rock-bottom prices. Only Dollar Tree still prices all its goods at \$1, but Family Dollar and Dollar General might have 10,000 products for that price, and reasonable deals on \$2-\$10 goods. It's a place where almost anyone on any budget can splurge a little on treating themselves.

Sixty-two percent of adults surveyed by brand intelligence firm Morning Consult say Dollar Tree "[has a positive effect on my community](#)" (compared to 51 percent for Starbucks and 59 percent for Target.)

People who can afford more choices – driving out to a big-box store, buying in bulk, ordering online, patronizing a farmer's market – simply can't see the perspective of someone for whom the dollar store is the most practical option.

Relatively wealthy dollar store detractors exhibit the obliviousness of an out-of-touch aristocracy. According to legend, Marie Antoinette, queen of France, when told that her subjects were going hungry for want of bread, responded blithely, “Let them eat cake.”

Now, politicians and middle-class activists seek to ban sources of \$1 bread with an unspoken, “Let them eat Whole Foods.”

“Terrible food...and such small portions!”

Opponents of dollar stores often contradict each other or even themselves.

Critics [objected](#) when suburban growth sent stores running for whiter, more affluent suburbs. But dollar stores’ explicit attempts to reverse this trend – to set up affordable retail options in poorer, underserved neighborhoods – are somehow also the target of scorn.

You’ll also hear critics claim dollar stores engage in “predatory” behavior by offering prices that are simultaneously [too low](#) (undercutting potential competitors) and [also too high](#) (as compared to a per-unit cost at the Costco 15 miles away.)

Haters complain retail jobs offered by dollar stores are “[low quality and low-wage](#)” but also that dollar stores [don’t create enough](#) of these low-quality, undesirable jobs. One is reminded of the Woody Allen line complaining about a restaurant’s “terrible food...and such small portions!”

A Tulsa councilwoman begrudgingly confirmed that dollar retailers offer essentials like toothpaste and school supplies, bread and eggs, in areas where supermarkets “[have consistently failed](#).” Why this is condemnable, rather than

laudable, she does not explain.

With [backward economic thinking](#), [CNN claimed](#) dollar stores “limit poor communities’ access to healthy food,” blaming low-cost retailers for the gaps they try to fill.

Bans on walkable, ultra-affordable stores do nothing to increase the availability of fresh food; they merely stamp out the only existing option.

A Failure to Relate

So if not those surface-level concerns, what’s really driving dollar-store bans? Could it be a simple lack of empathy?

In the neighborhoods and rural areas where dollar retailers are most popular, they offer affordable groceries to those with tight budgets, packed schedules, and limited mobility.

These laws are proposed by people who don’t shop in dollar stores and can’t understand why anyone would want to.

A [planner and architect](#) from Baltimore [said dollar stores](#) were popping up in poorer neighborhoods, “like a parasite.” Bill Torpy, columnist for *the Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said County Commissioners were right to be “disgusted” as dollar stores moved in (the headline has since been changed to “rightly sees little value in”).

[Why DeKalb County is disgusted as dollar stores ... - AJC.com](#)

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Dec 26, 2019 - Dollar stores are called the “invasive species” of retail, a rapidly growing kudzu that’s helping to destroy establishments that Walmart and Amazon haven’t already killed. It’s an economic race to the bottom, so DeKalb County Commissioner Lorraine Cochran-Johnson has led an ...

Residents of Chester, Vermont, rejected a proposed dollar store because residents feared “[the beginning of the end for](#)

[Chester's Vermontiness.](#)" Dollar store skeptics nationwide say they value "community character" and reject the "unsightliness" of dollar store signage.

For people with cars, free time, and disposable income, "just drive two miles to the grocery store" may seem like benign advice. But for people just getting by, it's dismissive of their real challenges.

If the same work had been done by a food bank – 30,000 locations providing ultra-affordable, shelf-stable groceries, concentrated in areas with the most need – would we applaud it?

Perhaps, but only if the signage were subtle and they weren't close enough that people could walk to them. We wouldn't want to look like the kind of neighborhood that needs those.

It's not wrong to care about community character or beautiful streets. But it's an injustice to care about them so much that you'll use government power to block (other) people's access to affordable bread, pencils, and toilet paper. And it adds condescending insult to injury to claim to be doing so "for their own good."

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