



## Health Policy

### Objective:

Protect the health of communities

### Strategy:

Make healthy choices easy choices through policy, system, and environment changes

### What is happening in King County?

Individual choice and overall health is influenced by the communities in which we live.

Land use policies and transportation investments can play key roles in making the community environment healthier and making healthy choices easier for individuals. Well-planned neighborhoods have features like connected street networks, nearby shopping, walking paths, parks or open space and transit service. These amenities reduce dependency on cars, increase opportunities to be physically active, and improve air quality, making the healthier choice the easier choice.

Walkable neighborhoods can help us reach our goals for efficient transportation, improved air quality, healthier communities and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. A walkable neighborhood is one that has compact residential development, compact retail development, a mix of land uses, and a well-connected street network. Residents of walkable areas are less likely to be overweight or obese and more likely to report being physically active. Healthy retail options help families purchase the healthy food that they need, in their neighborhoods. Availability of fresh produce near one's residence is a key strategy to promoting healthy weight. Increasing smoke-free environments helps reduce exposure to second and third-hand smoke, and encourages smokers to quit.

### How is our performance?

While King County does not have well developed measures for this strategy, anecdotal evidence suggests that King County does a good job of making healthy choices easy compared to other communities in the state and across the country. Some examples include the work that King County has done to support the work of community partners and local governments to improve overall policies, systems and environmental context for healthy decision-making. These include improvements to the quality of school meals in 8 districts with 169,203 students, removal of sugary drinks from 7 churches with 9,100 members, limiting access to sugary drinks at 13 Boys and Girls Clubs, improved access to farmers markets for over 70,000 food assistance (SNAP and WIC) recipients, implementation of model physical education (PE) curricula in 47 schools, adoption of healthy comprehensive plans in 6 cities with 600,000 residents, and creation of smoke-free/tobacco-free places in 13,000 public housing units and 8 local park systems. An additional example of this is Seattle's 9th place ParkScore ranking out of 40 cities across the country by the Trust for Public Land. King County residents' relatively good access to transit also makes a healthy lifestyle more convenient.

Increasing evidence suggests that the food available for purchase in a community - the retail food environment - influences the types and quantities of food that people purchase and consume. Retail food outlets that sell affordable, high quality, nutritious foods can encourage a healthy diet, reducing an individual's risk for chronic diseases, including obesity and diabetes.

The Retail Food Environment Index (RFEI) shows the ratio of unhealthy to healthy food outlets. A RFEI higher than 1.0 indicates there are more unhealthy than healthy outlets in an area; a RFEI of less than 1.0 indicates healthy food outlets are the majority. Fast food restaurants and convenience stores are classified as unhealthy, while supermarkets, small grocers, and produce vendors (produce stores and farmers markets) are classified as healthy.

In King County, the food environment varies by location. The RFEI varies from a high of 7 in East Federal Way to .5 in Vashon Island, with the county average at 2.4. This means that there are approximately two and a half times the fast-food restaurants and convenience stores compared to grocery stores and produce vendors across King County. In general, South King County tends to have higher RFEI compared to the King County average. The effect is most pronounced in the Health Reporting Areas along the I-5 corridor.

The RFEI is a pilot measure of access to healthy food. We hope it will generate community conversations about the need for a healthy food environment and welcome comments about the measure's usefulness. In King County, it is clear that we still have work to do. Walkable neighborhoods, access to transit, proximity to parks, and availability of healthy foods can vary widely by neighborhood, city and region within the county. Recent guidelines approved by the King County Board of Health provide guidance to cities working to improve their neighborhood environments for local residents. King County is working to promote healthier 'corner stores' so that healthy food is available regardless of the retail environment. Additional work to expand the availability of smoke-free environments and access to healthy foods through local city, school, hospital and other voluntary policies is an ongoing body of work for King County.

## **Moving forward**

King County monitors the indicators of progress toward this strategy in order to adjust policy and investment to make healthy choices easier for all residents.

King County adopted system and policy changes to build healthier communities and give people access to healthy choices. This includes the incorporation of health in planning policies and city and county comprehensive plans, land use and building codes (e.g. 'complete street' ordinances), facility expansion and improvements (e.g. regional trails and parks), and programs (e.g. Safe Routes to Schools).

King County is also developing a policy surveillance system and measures to identify the extent to which King County residents are covered by effective policies, systems and environmental conditions that support access to healthy foods, limit access to sugary drinks, and access to smoke-free environments.

## **Related Links**

**[Learn more about King County's Healthy Community Planning](#)**

**[Learn about Healthy King County, a community partnership addressing needed policies, systems and environmental changes for health](#)**

## **Technical Notes**

Park Score data from <http://parkscore.tpl.org/city.php?city=Seattle>

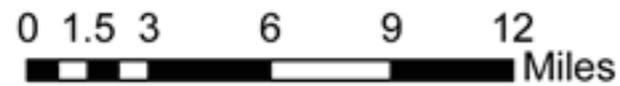
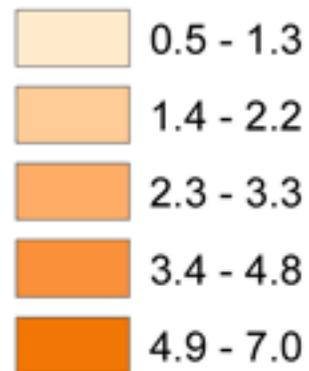
Data for Areas without Access to Healthy Foods from the US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service Food Desert Locator.

## **Charts and Maps**

# Retail Food Environment Index by Health Reporting Area King County, Washington

## Legend

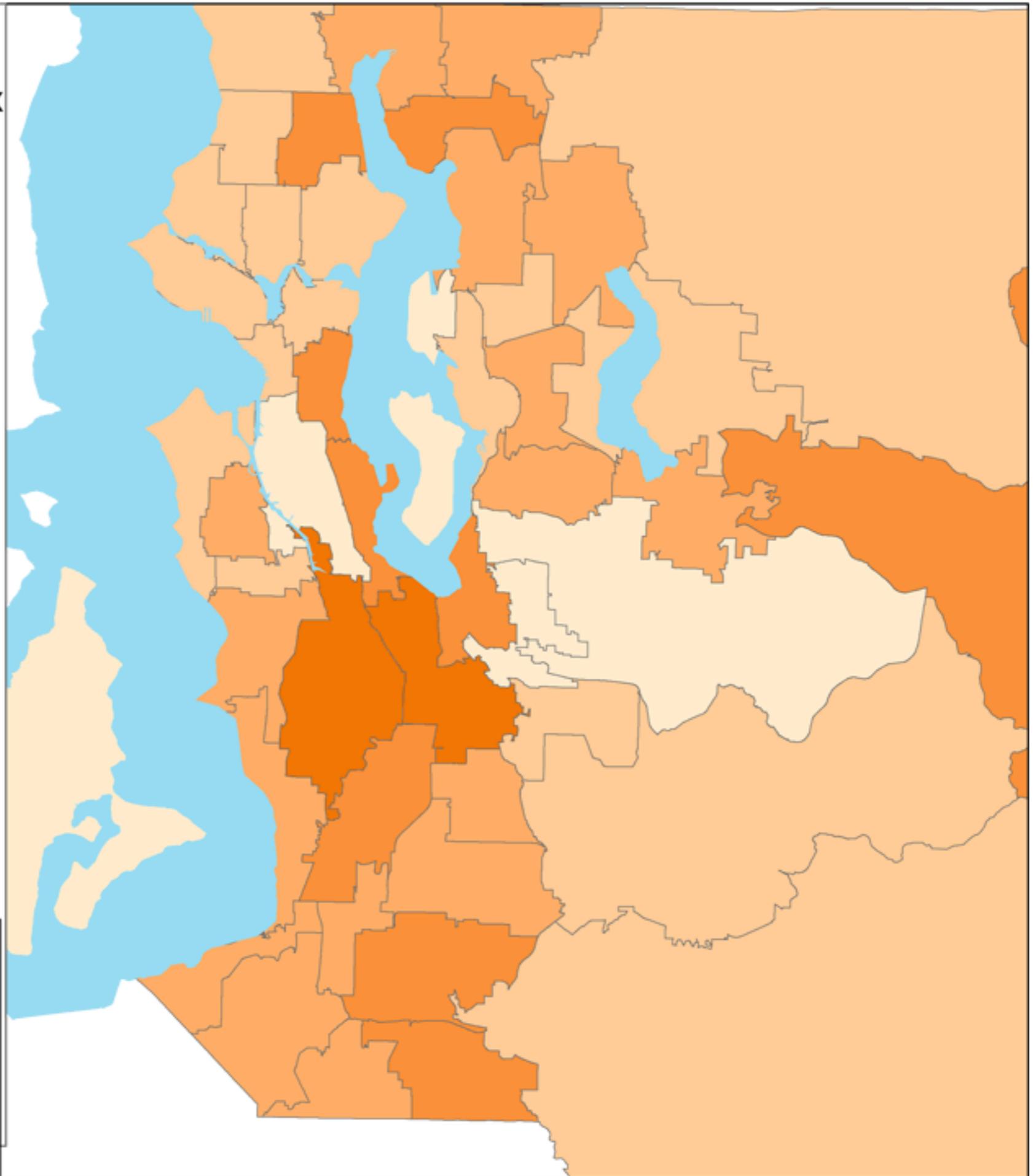
### RFEI



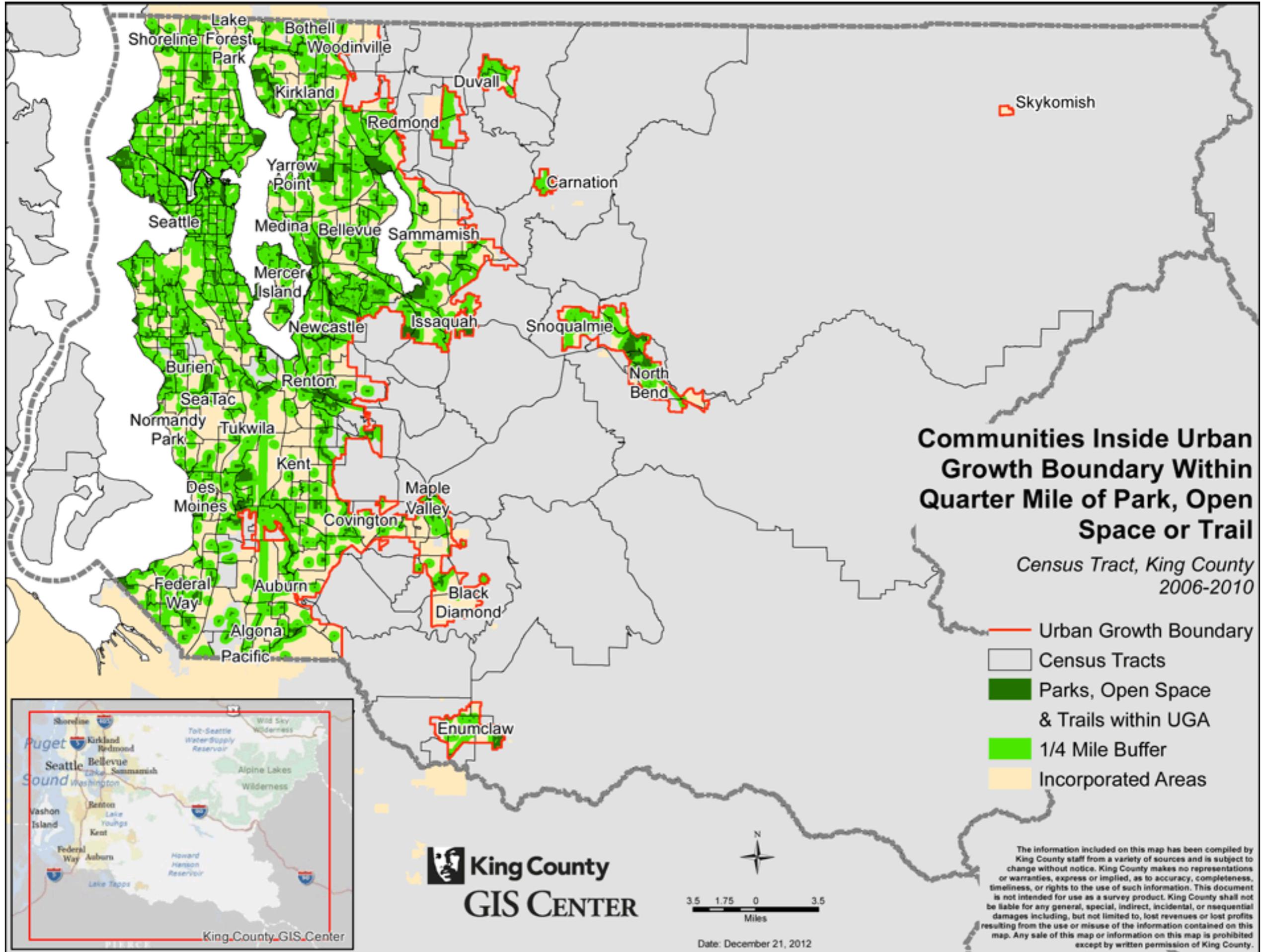
RFEI is a ratio of fast food restaurants & convenience stores, divided by the number of groceries, farmer's markets, and produce stands. Higher RFEI suggests greater concentration of unhealthy food. The King County average is 2.4

InfoUSA, 2/2010.

Produced by: Public Health - Seattle & King County; Assessment, Policy Development & Evaluation Unit, 9/6/2012



Communities Inside Urban Growth Boundary within one Quarter Mile of Park, Open Space, or Trail



# Areas Without Access to Healthy Food

## Areas Without Access to Healthy Food

King County, Census Tract  
2010

Data Source: USDA

- No
- Yes

1.5 0.75 0 1.5  
Miles



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GIS CENTER**



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