

Regent Park's FreshCo lives up to its name

October 30, 2010

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Staff Reporters

The floors are clean. The staff are smiling. The deals are plentiful.

For the first time in decades, Regent Park residents have a grocery store worth calling their own.

This is FreshCo, the first grocery store in Regent Park. For years, the culturally diverse community has not had a one-stop grocery shop, leaving one of the city's most impoverished areas at a loss. A full shopping trip required a bus trip, a taxi, or a cumbersome walk home from another neighbourhood with boxes and bags. But as mixed income housing opens in Regent Park, new stores have followed. The question, however, is this: Are they there to serve Regent Park's more affluent new residents, or the whole community?

In its first few weeks in business, FreshCo has trumpeted itself as the Cadillac of discount shopping, with "low prices and less compromise." Already, residents from St. James Town and even further afield are making the trek to Regent Park to shop, instead of the other way around.

The *Star* tested the claim by shopping from the same grocery list at FreshCo (owned by Sobey's) and the closest other competitors — No Frills (owned by Loblaws) on Parliament and Food Basics (owned by Metro) on Wellesley St. E., which is closer to St. James Town.

Sister Gwen Smith, director of the Mustard Seed outreach centre on Queen St. E. near Broadview, helped prepare a list of staple foods suitable for a low income family.

Smith offered suggestions like tuna, canned pork and beans and powdered skim milk. While comfort food (like Kraft Dinner) and pudding are also popular, she says mothers in particular

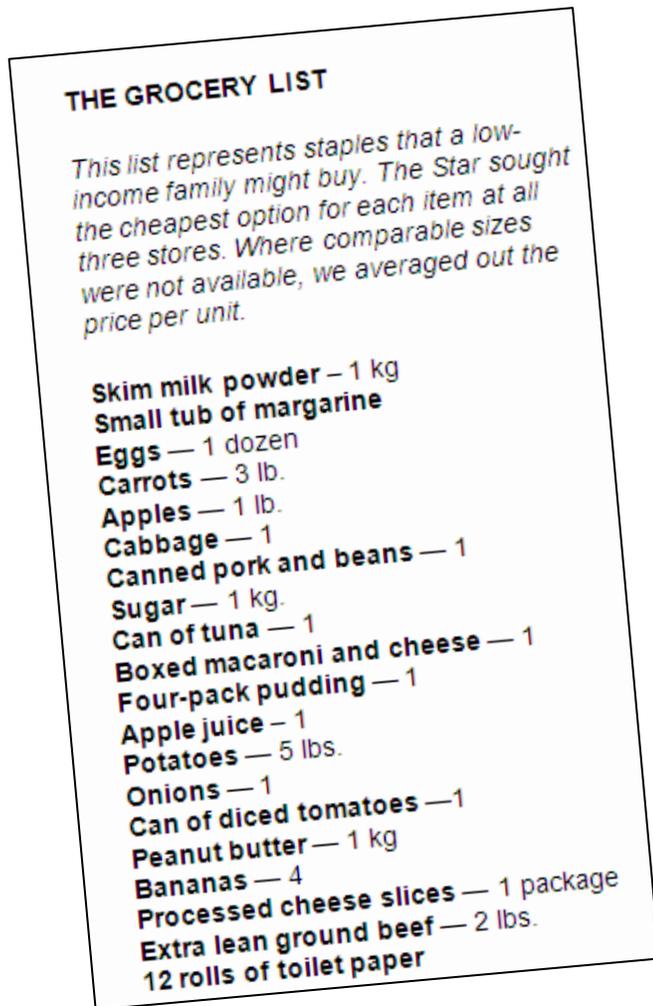


Star reporters Katie Daubs and Amy Dempsey, left, go grocery shopping at the Freshco grocery store at Dundas and Parliament streets.

RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

go for produce. Cabbage is a good buy, she said, because it's "cheap and you can do a lot of things with it."

Inside the gleaming new aisles of FreshCo, many shoppers were impressed with both the produce and selection.



"We used to go to No Frills," Ahmada Mwendambo said as he carried three bags of different grapes to the checkout. "Now, we are regulars here."

FreshCo is much closer to Mwendambo's Regent Park home, so he can pop in for small things and avoid the big Saturday shop.

His friend Ali Ngwali says the prices vary between No Frills and FreshCo, but if he is buying a big order, the price is about the same.

"For now," Mwendambo added. He and other residents are worried the good prices won't last.

FreshCo general manager Rob Adams said there aren't any tricks.

"We don't have an introductory pricing strategy in place," he said. "We checked over 1,000 of the top selling items every week against all of our key competitors."

When Smith saw the food purchased from FreshCo, she was impressed by the quality, as well as the prices. Based on the list she provide, the new store proved to be the least expensive

of the three options by \$2 to \$3 — enough to buy a few coffees or a ride on the TTC. FreshCo also provided the best quality food, making it not only convenient for residents of Regent Park, but bang for the buck as well.

Smith is now considering a switch herself.

"Oh my word," she said as she examined the pudding cups. "No trans fats."

The Star haul was donated to Mustard Seed once the experiment was complete.

FreshCo

Slogan: *Fresher. Cheaper.*

Should read: *Fresher. Cheaper.*

Location: 325 Parliament St.

Convenience Factor: Parking is free for the first 90 minutes. It's on the corner of Parliament and Dundas, so within walking distance for all Regent Park residents.

Total cost: \$43.50

Value for money: Very good. Hunt's pudding, Kraft peanut butter, and Black Diamond cheese slices were all considerably lower than the no name brands offered at the store. The produce was fresh and varied.

Experience: Pleasant. It's new and well maintained. The staff is friendly. The aisles could be wider. There were many brand name products that sell for more everywhere else. Huge selection of produce including things you wouldn't find at most discount stores, including sugarcane and okra.

Food Basics

Slogan: *always more for less!*

Should read: *a bit less for a bit more!*

Location: 238 Wellesley St. East

Convenience Factor: More than one kilometer away from Regent Park, the trip doesn't make a lot of sense. For St. James Town residents, however, it's centrally located. Parking is free for an hour. On a bus route.

Total cost: \$46.25

Value for money: Good. The cheapest products were almost always the no name products. There was a sale on Black Diamond processed cheese slices, but that was the only name brand item on our list. The produce however, was not as nice at Food Basics. Apples were soft and had holes.

Experience: The store has been around for a while and it shows. You have to pay for your cart (a quarter) and many carts have stubborn wheels that will steer you in a direction you don't want to travel. The floor was sticky, the produce wasn't well stocked, and many cans were dented.

No Frills

Slogan: *Lower food prices*

Should read: *Lower food prices, with a side of chaos*

Location: 449 Parliament St. 650 metres from 32 Regent St. (8 minute walk)

Convenience Factor: It was the closest option for Regent Park residents until FreshCo opened and is still within reasonable walking distance.

Total cost: \$45.21

Value for money: Reasonable. The cheapest items are almost always no name brands. Lots of produce to choose from, but much of it was slightly beaten or bruised. The store does guarantee to price-match anything if you find a better deal elsewhere. A bit of a hassle, but worth it if you have the time and patience.

Experience: Unpleasant. Narrow aisles, overstocked shelves, boxes everywhere and long, long checkout lineups. (We waited 15 minutes.) You pay for a cart (a quarter). Floors were dirty at the end of the day. Also, the entire store — signs, walls, shelves — is an eye-assaulting shade of No Frills yellow. Get in and out as quick as you can.