Editorial: Food deserts: Bill could help improve public health

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They said it couldn’t be done, but a group in the state legislature is finding a way to fight the state’s food deserts.

“Food deserts” is the term given to urban areas in which it’s difficult to find fresh, healthy and inexpensive food. Low-income people with a lack of transportation often wind up eating the limited and unhealthy offerings, high in fat and low in nutrients – and more expensive - from convenience stores, and the result is poorer health that can exacerbate problems like obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Some in the legislature have in the past said there was nothing they could do, but a bipartisan group of state legislators from both chambers have produced a bill that might turn the tide, judging from what the Journal’s Bertrand M. Gutierrez reported last week.

State Rep. Donny Lambeth, R-Forsyth, is one of the primary sponsors of the bill, which calls for a $1 million fund that county or public health departments throughout the state would use to pay for shelving, refrigeration equipment and related items in small stores located in identified food deserts. Participating store owners would contract with local producers to stock “nutrient-dense foods,” which includes fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains, nuts, seeds, beans and legumes, low-fat dairy products, lean meats and seafood. The bill contains provisions that would rescind the deal if it didn’t meet expected standards.

Lambeth, who is a former health-care executive, says that healthier food must be a priority “if we are going to reduce their cost of health care.”

Good for him and the others to recognize that these factors go together.

Rep. Yvonne Holley, D-Wake, a supporter of the bill, said in a news conference last week that it could increase access to healthy foods, expand existing businesses and create another avenue for local farmers to sell their products. Sounds like a win-win.

Rep. Brian Brown, R-Pitt, another supporter, works in the food-service industry and noted that similar pilot programs have worked in the past. He said it should help small-business owners provide healthy products and be profitable.

We hope the bill passes. It could complement efforts to combat food deserts such as Forsyth County’s Healthy Corner Store Network, and lead to more efforts in the fight.

We also like a bill that Lambeth has co-sponsored that would increase the amount of malt beverages a craft brewery could sell, deliver and ship annually before being required to use a wholesale distributor, as the Journal’s Richard Craver reported last week. The bill increases the amount from 25,000 to 100,000 barrels.

“The number of small breweries is growing in North Carolina, as well as their products, just like the wine industry,” Lambeth told the Journal. “These breweries are important to the economy of this state.

It’s all about having more choices.

We hope “If you build it, they will come” applies in both cases.