Lawmakers Want to Make Healthy Eating Easier at Corner Stores

A new bill would provide funds to help corner stores get trained and get equipment to carry produce and healthier choices.

By Rose Hoban

The little corner store at the intersection of North Roxboro and Geer streets north of Durham’s downtown looks like any other corner store in Durham: There are cases of beer, soda and malt liquor, and an aisle of sweets.

But take a second look and you'll see that next to the Kix cereal are boxes of Fiber One and Total, next to the mini donuts sit bags of dried beans and near the Vienna sausages are cans of vegetables, right next to the oatmeal. The refrigerated section sports 2 percent milk, eggs and unsweetened juices. On a wooden shelf unit next to the checkout are sweet potatoes, onions, apples, oranges and bananas.

Shawn Saeed, the clerk behind the counter, said the owner brings in the fruits and vegetables twice a week and sometimes the Durham County Department of Public Health “veggie van” swings by with a delivery. He said the healthy stuff "sells good."

That’s exactly what Reps. Yvonne Lewis Holley (D-Raleigh) and Chris Whitmire (R-Rosman) like to hear. The legislative odd couple got together last year to co-chair a committee at the General Assembly looking at “food desert” issues across North Carolina.

This year, they're sponsoring a bill that would give a boost to corner stores like the one in Durham. The bill would insert $1 million into the state budget to help small stores get equipment such as refrigerators, coolers and shelving to display fruits and vegetables. The money would also be used to train store owners how to properly handle the produce and advertise the presence of the healthy food. “It’s estimated that 1.5 million of our fellow North Carolinians are living in situations where they don't have reliable access to healthy, affordable foods,” Whitmire said.

He pointed out that many people live in places without access to “nutritious low-protein type foods, healthy foods. They suffer from obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.”
The corner store at North Roxboro and Geer Streets in Old North Durham has decorated with posters and banners promoting healthy food choices for children. Photo credit: Rose Hoban

According to America's Health Rankings, 29.4 percent of North Carolina adults are obese, and 11.4 percent of adults have been told at some point by their doctor that they have diabetes.

“If the place that you can get to has basically fat-laden, preservative-laden foods that really just don't lend themselves to good nutrition, it just compounds the issue,” Whitmire said.

**Rural and urban problem**

Last year’s [food desert zone subcommittee hearings](#) packed dozens of presentations into four meetings and concluded that there are both supply and demand problems in getting people access to healthy foods. For example, stores have limited size and storage for fresh foods; potentially higher costs of fresh foods are also an issue.

Whitmire noted that some of the recommendations of the study committee are now being implemented without legislation because many ideas made sense and cost next to nothing to put into action.

But Holley said corner stores need more help taking the next step, and that’s what the money would be for.

Betsy Vetter from the American Heart Association pointed out that refrigerators for stocking soda and beer do not have to be as temperature sensitive as those needed for produce and milk.

“You can’t just replace one with the other. It’s important to help the store owners understand, and once they do they can be successful,” Vetter said.

A poll done by the NC Alliance for Health in Nov. 2014 found most voters supported the Healthy Corner Store Initiative.
Holley said the incentive for corner stores to get involved in the initiative is "good health and an expansion of their business."

She said that in Durham County alone, there are 70 corner stores that have asked for help to carry more healthy produce.

But the problem isn’t only an urban one, Whitmire said.

"I think of a little store that’s on Hwy. 215, going to a little place called Balsam Grove. And for years, the only place to get a fresh gallon of milk within 20 or 30 minutes drive … was right there," Whitmire said.

That kind of situation is more common than folks might think, Vetter added.

"It looks different in different places. But the key is how, if people want to eat healthy, that they can actually eat healthy," Vetter said.

A convenience store in Bethel, a town in rural Pitt County, now carries local melons and other produce thanks to help from the Healthy Corner Store Initiative. Photo courtesy Betsy Vetter, American Heart Association.

Helping farmers
Other legislators have signed onto the bill because they want to help their local farmers gain access to new markets.

Sen. Louis Pate (R-Mt. Olive) said some of his farmer constituents were able to get some help selling through a corner store in Greenville.

"What they did successfully in Pitt County was link farmers right into the store owners," Vetter said.

She also pointed to some success in Bethel, a town about 15 miles from Greenville, where local health officials linked a rural convenience store up with a local farmer.

"And so the farmer is selling more," Vetter said.

She also pointed out that in the eastern part of the state, the program could also benefit fishermen, who would be helped to get their catch into convenience stores.

"If we can assist small store owners in rural and urban areas alike to be able to stock and sell fresh produce, so we can connect farmers and agribusiness to where there’s a market, we all win," Whitmire said.