Healthy food bill would combat food deserts

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Bertrand M. Gutierrez/Winston-Salem Journal

Without easy access to supermarkets, people tend to do their shopping at convenience stores.

House Bill 250 would assist these small-store owners to stock and sell fresh produce, and connect them with farmers in their area to sell local foods, state Rep. Donny Lambeth, R-Forsyth, said this week.

More access to healthy food “must be a priority if we are going to reduce their cost of health care,” said Lambeth, who is a former health-care executive.

Roughly 1.5 million North Carolinians live in rural or urban areas known as food deserts, with poor access to affordable, healthy foods, according to the nonprofit N.C. Alliance for Health.

To help deal with food deserts, Lambeth has joined a group of Democrats and Republicans from both chambers of the state General Assembly to publicly support the bill, known as the Healthy Food Small Retailer Act.

The proposal comes a year after a legislative committee heard about food deserts in North Carolina.

At the time, former state Rep. Edgar Starnes, R-Caldwell, who was a co-chairman of the state House Committee on Food Desert Zones, said the General Assembly should not get in the way of the problem but could do little to help it.

“It (food desert) is a problem in North Carolina, but it’s something that has to be fixed by the private sector. We wanted to see if state government was putting up barriers to stop private businesses from locating in these food deserts, and we found that state government is not putting up barriers,” Starnes said. “There isn’t much we can do.”

Starnes resigned in January to lobby for State Treasurer Janet Cowell.

On Tuesday, Rep. Yvonne Holley, D-Wake, said in a news conference that the bill could do several things: increase access to healthy foods; expand existing businesses; and create another avenue for local farmers to sell their products. The effort would cost about $1 million, mostly for equipment to store the food, according to Holley, though she said that she did not know yet where the money would come from.

Rep. Brian Brown, R-Pitt, who works in the food-service industry, said he signed on in part because similar pilot programs have worked and because “this is a great initiative to actually help … small-business owners who want to provide healthy products, change behavioral patterns of consumers, but also make a living and be profitable.”
Limited access to fresh foods can lead to chronic diseases such as obesity, Type II diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, according to the N.C. Alliance for Health, a coalition that includes more than 50 organizations. Among them are the American Cancer Society, N.C. Association of Local Health Directors, and N.C. Public Health Association.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as a low-income census tract in which at least 33 percent, or a minimum of 500 people, live more than 1 mile from a supermarket or grocery store in an urban area or more than 10 miles in a rural area.

In Forsyth County, nearly 23,000 people earn less than the low-income threshold and live more than a mile from a supermarket, according a Winston-Salem Journal analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture data. At a half-mile, there are about 38,000 people.

One of the most severe food deserts in Winston-Salem sits roughly between Sixth Street, Patterson Avenue, Northwest Boulevard and Summit Street.

About half the households have no car, according to the USDA, citing 2010 Census data. Nearly 3 out of 4 people have an annual family income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold, and they live more than a half-mile from a supermarket, according to the USDA.

Forsyth County has its eye on food deserts, according to Lynne Mitchell, the Personal Health Services administrator at the county’s Department of Public Health.

Among the efforts is the Healthy Corner Store Network, consisting of five stores: Parker's Stop & Shop, on 4257 Reidsville Road; Tickled Pink Convenience, at 3080 Kernersville Road; Kingz Downtown Market, at 418 N. Liberty St.; P&P Convenience, at 2723 Farmall St.; and La Comercial, at 1218 Waughtown St.

“Right now, the Healthy Corner Store Network is the main initiative in the food access category,” Mitchell said.

bgutierrez@wsjournal.com

(336) 727-7278