'Corner store' legislation unveiled

By Laura Leslie

RALEIGH, N.C. — Supporters say a bipartisan proposal filed Tuesday to address North Carolina's "food desert" problem would also lend a helping hand to the state's mom-and-pop grocers and small farmers.

House Bill 250, the "Healthy Corner Store Initiative," would set aside $1 million in state funds to help small neighborhood stores buy the equipment needed to sell fresh produce, such as scales and coolers, as well as training programs to help store owners learn to handle and sell produce profitably.

The bill would also call on the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture & Consumer Services to work together to enhance existing distribution networks for local produce.

The legislation came out of an interim study committee on the problem. Rep. Yvonne Holley, D-Wake, said the closure of two major grocery stores in her southeastern Raleigh district in recent years spurred her to study the problem.

Backers say it will help small grocers expand their businesses while improving public health, especially reducing obesity, which is a major problem in North Carolina. One out of three children in the state is overweight or obese, and areas with limited access to fresh produce and other healthy food see higher rates of diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

About $1 out of every $5 spent on health care in the United States is spent on a problem related to obesity, said sponsor Rep. Chris Whitmire, R-Transylvania, who also noted the problem isn't just in urban centers. His "very rural" district, in the far western part of the state, contains food desert areas, too.

"If the place that you can get to has basically fat-laden, preservative-laden foods that don't lend themselves to good nutrition, it just compounds the issue," Whitmire said.
He cautioned that no single piece of legislation would fix the problem, which he said has many causes.

"If we can assist small-store owners in rural and urban areas alike to be able to stock and sell fresh produce so that we can connect farmers and agribusiness with markets where their products are needed, we all win," he said.

Sen. Louis Pate, R-Wayne, another co-sponsor, said it would be a boost to small local farmers and fishermen, too.

"It's becoming more and more difficult for North Carolina farmers to find markets for their products," Pate said. "This initiative would help connect farmers with new markets in their own communities."

Holley said the bill is "specifically for mom-and-pops," not large grocers, and that store owners would have to apply to the program for help. She said more than 70 such stores in Durham County have already expressed interest, but the program would seek to spread out its funds across many areas where it's needed.