N.C. Reps. file bill to take on food desert zones

On Monday, members of the North Carolina House of Representatives filed H250, the Healthy Food Small Retailer/Corner Store Act.

The bill will provide funding assistance of up to $5,000 to independently-owned corner stores and small retailers to upgrade their refrigeration equipment and provide employee training, to enable the stores to sell fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutrient-dense produce in food desert zones.

Food desert zones are census tracts that have been identified by the US Department of Agriculture as having a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, and having at least a 33 percent of the population in a metropolitan area living more than a mile from a grocery store, or more than ten miles away in a rural area.

The bill was spearheaded by Wake County Rep. Yvonne Holley, whose district in Southeast Raleigh became a food desert zone after the only grocery store, a Kroger, closed two years ago. Last year, Holley and Rep. Chris Whitmire, who represents three rural western counties south of Asheville, led a study committee on food desert zones.

Some of the committee’s findings included high rates of obesity in children (31 percent) and in adults (65 percent) residing in North Carolina, statistics which are directly correlated with a lack of access to healthy, nutritious foods.

“North Carolinians view unhealthy eating and childhood obesity as the most serious problems facing kids across the country today, above a lack of physical activity, education or spending time outside,” said Sarah Jacobson, Healthy Food Access Coordinator for the North Carolina Alliance for Health. “It’s time to stop talking about this issue and to start doing something about it.”

She added that the initiative will remove barriers to healthy eating as well as help small business owners, farmers and fisherman in the state and that an Alliance for Health survey found that 70-76 percent of registered voters in the North Carolina support the measure.

The Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund will be created as a restricted reserve in the state’s Department of Commerce. Holley and Whitmire hope that $1 million will be designated as a line item in the state’s budget for the initiative.

Holley said that in Durham County, more than 70 convenience stores already have expressed interest.

“This is an opt-in program for thousands of corner stores across state,” said Holley at a press conference Tuesday. “The benefit is expanded business and good, healthy food.”