Bringing an oasis to food deserts

By Wes Wolfe / Staff writer
Published: Tuesday, March 17, 2015 at 18:51 PM.

Having a long way to go for decent groceries isn’t just an inconvenience, it’s a health crisis.

For many in Lenoir County, access to fresh produce and nutritious food is anything but a walk to the store. Tuesday, a bipartisan group of legislators and nonprofit leaders gathered at the General Assembly to roll out legislation to do something about it.

“Limited food access and insecurity adversely impacts diet and health, and is one of the causes of our state’s high obesity rate,” said Pam Seamans, executive director of the N.C. Alliance for Health.
She continued, “The goal the Healthy Corner Store Initiative is to provide technical and marketing assistance and education to the store owners and consumers, along with equipment, including things like scales — to weigh produce, for instance — and refrigerators for fresh and frozen foods.

“This would be for small businesses to improve the availability, affordability and accessibility of these healthy foods to small food retailers in food deserts.”

Food deserts are, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a census tract with a poverty rate at 20 percent or higher with a median family income at or below 80 percent of the state median income. Then, for metropolitan areas, in a food desert has at least 33 percent of the population who lives more than a mile from a grocery store or, for a non-metropolitan area, 10 miles.

Lenoir County has two food deserts. One starts inside the eastern side of the Kinston city limits, with
the western border comprised of N.C. 11 North, Laura Lane, Raleigh Street, North Adkin Street and the Yadkin Branch south to the Neuse River, which makes the southern and eastern boundaries.

The northern border runs from N.C. 11 North east along Dunn Road, then slightly south on Tower Hill Road and east again, extending from the 2600 block of Tower Hill Road to the Neuse.

The other food desert covers a wide swath of the northern part of the county. Its northern border is the Greene County line, its western border is U.S. 258 North, and Briary Run comprises the southern border. Its eastern border’s largely split between Stoneyton Creek, Hugo Road and Felix Hardison Road.

Sen. Don Davis, D-Greene, and Senate Deputy President Pro Tem Louis Pate, R-Wayne, are the primary sponsors for the Senate version of the Healthy Food Small Retailer/Corner Store Act, S.B. 296.

“The Healthy Corner Store Initiative — I want to be very clear — I’m standing in support because I believe this initiative to help local entrepreneurs, especially as they’ll be able to sell healthier foods,” Davis said. “Also, we’ll be able to reach out into local communities, and I believe this will have ... an awesome impact.”

Davis made mention of a Pitt County market that began participating in the initiative in 2011 and where there was a transformation in customer behavior, going from buying the usual chips and other snacks to regularly purchasing fresh produce.

“I think that’s a lot to be said, a lot to be celebrated,” Davis said.

Pate noted the initiative and the legislation provide new opportunities for the state’s farmers, as well.

“It’s not easy to be a farmer these days — they’re having problems — this would be an additional advantage, because it’s going to get the farmers involved in selling their products, and perhaps even growing new products for the benefit of our citizens,” Pate said. “It’s becoming more and more difficult for North Carolina farmers to find markets for their products.”

Pate said the initiative would help farmers expand into new markets, thanks to collaborative efforts between the state departments of agriculture and commerce, and the Division of Public Health.

The legislation, if enacted, would establish a $1 million Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund, administered by the state through county and area health departments. The money and how it’s spent would be governed by food desert relief agreements between the state and the local health authority and performance agreements between the health authority and retailers.
S.B. 296 was filed Tuesday and hasn’t received first reading yet. Its companion bill, H.B. 250, received first reading and was referred to the House Committee on Appropriations.

Wes Wolfe can be reached at 252-559-1075 and Wes.Wolfe@Kinston.com. Follow him on Twitter @WolfeReports.

Copyright © 2015 http://www.kinston.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.