Filling the food void: County has several 'food desert' tracts

By Jackie Bridges

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According to the USDA, a significant number of Shelby’s residents on the east side of town live in a “Food Desert” – meaning they are more than one-half mile from a supermarket.

And 13 percent of them – according to the City of Shelby Pedestrian Plan – walk as part of their transportation.

As Catalyst for Healthy Eating and Active Living in Cleveland County – a job she’s had since 2012 – Tammy Bass works to improve access to healthy food for all populations.

Cleveland County is one of only four counties in North Carolina that has a catalyst coordinator. Through her assistance, debit and SNAP/EBT programs have been created at three Foothills Farmers’ Market locations: Uptown Shelby, Health Department satellite and the Kings Mountain location.

Lowe's Foods closing left a void

When Lowes Foods left Shelby in 2014, Bass said the store’s closing created a hardship for people who don’t have a car.

“The property where Lowe’s Foods was located is not considered a USDA designated food desert, however the property is surrounded by three census tracts that are designated as USDA food deserts,” Bass said. “Especially in food desert locations, a grocery store within one-half mile for pedestrian accessibility is critical to all populations having access to healthy food.”

According to Walt Scharer, Planning and Development Services Director for the City of Shelby, Shelby has the third-highest per capita population with no car in North Carolina.

Scharer also pointed out that people in the center of town have no access to a full grocery store and until a sidewalk was recently added in front of the County Office Building on South Post Road, which is adjacent to a Food Lion, there was no good pedestrian access to any of the grocery stores in Shelby.

“When we had Lowes Foods, some people did walk there even though there are very few safe walking paths to that location,” Bass said. “Now that it is gone, for those who have to walk as their means of transportation, there is a void in the center of town and now also to the east side.”

Grocery store also a community gathering point

Nancy Abasiekong, Extension Agent, Family & Consumer Sciences, NC Cooperative Extension Cleveland County Center, works closely with local residents teaching nutrition and cooking classes.

“The community on the east side of Shelby, and other consumers who frequently shopped at the grocery stores in the shopping center on East Marion Street, miss the convenience of having a local grocery store with a wide variety of quality items and extended hours of operation,” Abasiekong said. “A grocery store in this location can also be a convenience for some older adults and others who may have limited driving and transportation options."

Not only does a local grocery store provide access to a variety of healthy foods and often, produce from local farmers, the store serves as a gathering point for the community.
“Research indicates this can influence the health of the community, while serving as a place for individuals and families to gather, share information and learn, socialize and come together with each other as a community,” Abasiekong said.

**Ora Supermarket draws customers from near and far**

B.E. Price, who helps his father, Bulo Ervin Price, run the 75-year-old Ora Supermarket, 1026 East Marion St., Shelby, said traffic in the store increased when Harris Teeter sold out to Lowe's Foods.

His father said there are several customers who walk, ride their bikes or motorized scooters to shop at the store.

But Ora is not a full-service grocery store, B.E. Price said.

"We are an old-fashioned meat market with produce," he said, noting they have added to the meat and produce offerings since Lowe's Foods closed.

On Thursday morning, one customer in the store had driven from Patterson Springs and another couple came from Bessemer City.

"I worked for Harris Teeter," Jewel Canipe, 72 said. "'Bring Harris Teeter back,' I hear it all the time. I shop at different places and stop here when I'm in town. I live three miles from the Ingles in Patterson Springs."

She said most of the people who worked for Harris Teeter either came to work at Ora or work for one of the Ingles stores in town. She also said that she usually sees former Harris Teeter customers while shopping at Ingles.

Gene and Wallie Pasour came to Ora, because they had seen the store's ad in the newspaper.

"We were curious and have heard people talking about it," Wallie Pasour said, as she bought a pack of footlong hot dogs and buns. "We found some unique things."

**What is a ‘Food Desert’?**

The USDA Healthy Food Financing Initiative Working Group considers a food desert as a low-income census tract where a substantial number of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store. Furthermore, to qualify as a food desert tract, at least 33 percent of the tract's population or a minimum of 500 people in the tract must have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.

Low access to a healthy food retail outlet is defined as more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in urban areas and as more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in rural areas.

In Cleveland County, there are three tracts near the Shelby City limits designated as low income and low access Food Deserts and seven tracts across the county designated as low access.