Guest columnist: Healthy Corner Stores - redesigning the way we access food
Xenna Smith GUEST COLUMNIST 10:27 a.m. EDT April 22, 2016

We can all agree that Asheville is a city that prides itself on promoting healthy living, but in reality there are Asheville citizens whose health is being compromised because they can’t access healthy foods. It is common knowledge that convenience stores tend to carry exclusively processed/nonperishable foods - but these markets are the main place where folks who lack reliable transportation and/or have a low-income access foods. These foods lend themselves to being not beneficial to a well-balanced diet.

I have been fortunate enough to not have to worry about having access to healthy foods. Once I started working with the nonprofit Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!), I learned that there are many youth and adults who have to rely on corner stores for their primary sustenance needs. I passionately believe that health is a human right and that we need to take action to help these families have access to healthy foods. One way we can do this is by helping convenience stores stock healthy foods. The Healthy Corner Store Act (the HCSA) – or House Bill 250/ Senate Bill 296 – can work wonders on improving statewide wellness by doing just that.

The HCSA is asking for a $1 million appropriation in the state budget that will be available statewide to local corner stores located in food deserts. That money would make it easier for business owners to provide healthy options and to increase their profits by providing equipment, marketing, shelving and training resources. This opportunity will also help farmers and fishermen have more retail markets to sell their products. There has been tremendous success reported in Pitt, Forsyth and Davidson counties, and we hope to be able to track this success across the state.

As a state, we need to ensure that every community member has the ability to access healthy foods to improve state health while supporting the state economy and local business owners. It is no secret that there is an obesity epidemic prevalent in N.C. with more than one-third of youth overweight/obese; one of the easiest ways for a legislator to help minimize the epidemic is by voting to pass the HCSA. Young people are being negatively affected by lack of access to healthy foods, the newest research has shown that youth who live near convenience stores have a higher BMI and consume more sugary drinks than their peers that don’t live in a close radius to a corner store. As a high-school age youth, clearly the HCSA directly affects myself and my peers – let’s work to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

In addition to helping improve statewide wellness, the HCSA will improve the economy of N.C. Agriculture contributes more than $78 billion of our state’s economy so it is important to make sure farmers are thriving. This act will increase demand for local fruits/vegetables by creating more markets for those goods.

I have had the opportunity to work closely with our community to advocate for the HCSA. We worked to do a photovoice campaign asking corner store patrons what they would like to see in the stores. The majority wished to have healthy options such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Observing the needs of the people in our community regarding food access made me passionate about making sure House Bill 250 & Senate Bill 296 passes and is included in the N.C. budget.
Some people have expressed concerns that the sum of $1 million out of the state budget for the HCSA would be a “waste of money.” I would recommend those people take another look at the numbers. Weight gain has been estimated to cost N.C. $17.6 billion each year in medical costs and lost employee productivity. The HCSA can ensure that more citizens have access to healthy foods; therefore, their wellness improves and saves N.C. health care costs.

According to a study conducted in 2014 by The North Carolina Alliance for Health, 70 percent of N.C. registered voters support the HCSA. A vast majority of citizens want to see this implemented because it is a huge win in every situation. Helping to pass House Bill 250/Senate Bill 296 is a triple win for North Carolinians: farmers, the local business owners, and the overall community.

If you’re like me and care about providing access to healthy foods, boosting our economy and making our state healthier, join us by contacting your state legislators and encourage them to support Senate Bill 296.

Xenna Smith is a high school junior at Roberson High School and has been working for the local nonprofit Youth Empowered Solutions for roughly a year. She is on the editorial board for her school’s journalism/communications class and enjoys spending time with her dog and spoken word poetry.