Corner store produce program survives 
NC House budget vote

BY COLIN CAMPBELL
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ccampbell@newsobserver.com

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A group of House Republicans tried unsuccessfully to kill a proposed $300,000 program to put fresh fruits and vegetables in convenience stores located in “food deserts.”

The program was approved by the House last year but wasn’t allotted funding until this year’s budget proposal. It would provide $6,000 grants to install refrigerators in convenience stores serving communities that don’t have access to grocery stores.

“North Carolina is the 21st obese state in our nation and is rising,” said Rep. Greg Murphy, a Greenville Republican who’s also a doctor. “What we’re doing is we’re trying to change behavior. This is a very small price to pay to get people on a healthy track.”

But Rep. Michael Speciale, a New Bern Republican, sought to remove the program from this year’s House budget proposal. His amendment would instead direct the $300,000 to rural economic development grants.

“Not many people go to convenience stores to buy fruits and vegetables,” Speciale said. “We go there to buy honey buns and Cokes.”

Several other Republicans also said the produce program isn’t an appropriate use of government funding.

“It’s shades of Michael Bloomberg,” said Rep. Larry Pittman of Concord, referring to the former New York mayor who tried to ban large sodas. “I don’t think we need to be interfering with people’s personal choices. I think it’s a misappropriation of taxpayer funding and trying to be a nanny state.”

Rep. Gary Pendleton, a Raleigh Republican, said a Northampton County town recently lost its grocery store and residents there struggle to get to the nearest store.

“I really think those people ought to be able to eat decent food,” Pendleton said. “How are they going to go 11 miles to a grocery store?”

Speciale said he’s skeptical that the program will work. “If people were willing to buy this stuff, it would already be in convenience stores,” he said, adding that when stores do offer fruits, “they’re sitting there rotting.”

Speciale’s effort to kill the program failed in a 19-46 vote of the House Appropriations Committee. It remains in the House budget bill that was approved in a 103-12 vote Wednesday.