Funds for Food Desert Initiative Move Forward

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Three years after the legislature started hearing about food deserts, legislators are poised to address North Carolina’s obesity problem.

By Rose Hoban

Walk into Carolina Country Fresh on the edge of the Pitt County town of Bethel this week and you’ll be surrounded by fresh lettuce, onions and peas. And strawberries – for another week or so. You drive past where they grew to get to the store, the only place for miles where you can find something fresh to eat.

Bethel is a blinking red stoplight where Main St. crosses Business 64, a couple of churches, a school, some pretty little houses and a lot of rundown ones.

If you don’t farm, there’s really not much else, said Josh Roberson, who owns Carolina Country Fresh. Even with the farms, the area used to be a food desert before he opened. You had to drive more than 10 miles to find some produce.

“A Piggly Wiggly was in town, and that grocery store closed up,” he said. “Dollar General started carrying some groceries and they’re not carrying much of anything fresh; it’s just a lot of canned and boxed stuff. There’s no immediate source of really fresh produce.”

Until Roberson and his dad opened their business.

Carolina Country Fresh was one of the original pilot sites for the so-called “corner store initiative” being discussed in the budget at the General Assembly this month. Roberson and his dad received a grant to get equipment to keep the produce fresh, especially in the summer.
“There’s one of the open front coolers; I think the technical term is like an air dam. It’s like a fan that blows air straight down to keep the cool air in,” he said. “It’s so accessible, it’s so nice and so open and has a mirrored background, so the produce you put in there looks really nice.”

Health advocates are asking for a million dollars to help small store owners around the state do what the Robersons have done.

“It definitely helps the aesthetics of the business,” Roberson said. “We’re all drawn to something shiny, something that looks nice, right?”

Berries vs. honey buns
During the 2015 legislative session, House lawmakers passed a bill allowing for small retailers such as Roberson’s to receive small grants up to $5,000 to cover the costs of buying or renting refrigerators, display shelving and other equipment that would allow for the stores to stock nutritious foods.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are 349 food deserts in urban areas in North Carolina. That means there’s no place to buy healthy food for more than a mile. In rural areas, that distance stretches to 10 miles.

Since passing the House in 2015, the bill has been sitting in a Senate committee. Peg O’Connell, a long-time lobbyist for public health interests, has been working both chambers to get the bill passed and the million dollars in seed money for the initiative into the state budget.

Even though many House members have been supportive, there’s been resistance.

“People don’t go to convenience stores to buy fruits and vegetables,” argued Rep. Michael Speciale (R-New Bern) during budget hearings. “We go there to buy honey buns – honey buns and Cokes.”

He moved an amendment that would have stricken the appropriation, which would have come from a community development block grant, and put it elsewhere.

But even the town of Oriental, in Speciale’s district, nearly became a food desert last year when the local Walmart Express closed. Local leaders scrambled to get fruits and vegetables into the local provision company that usually serves the waterfront.

Many folks were forced to drive up to two hours, to New Bern or Vanceboro, several times a month to grocery shop, said Town Manager Diane Miller.

A Piggly Wiggly will be moving into the old Walmart building soon, she said. But that was only because some high-powered retirees in town organized and made it happen.
“If you have a poor community with little resources and they’re trying to get through the same situation, then what do you do?” Miller asked.

Communications director Heather Monackey from WakeMed Hospital in Southeast Raleigh worked to bring a small once-weekly farmers market to the hospital grounds once the only grocery store in the area closed. She worked with Wake County farmer Roger Ball to get fresh fruits and vegetables to the neighborhood every year from April until Labor Day. Photo credit: Rose Hoban

In the end, Speciale’s amendment failed, and $300,000 of the money stayed in the final House budget.

“We’re starting to hear that if it comes over from the House in the budget, that the Senate might not take it out,” O’Connell said.

**Military readiness**

One strategy O’Connell’s taken for selling the initiative in the Senate has been to point out that obesity has become a national security problem of sorts.

In 2010, dozens of retired generals, admirals and civilian military leaders published a manifesto, *“Too Fat to Fight,”* calling on the U.S. to address its weight problem.

The group cited Department of Defense data showing that more than a quarter of young Americans are too physically unfit to be recruited into the military. The same report showed obesity was the leading medical reason for being rejected from service.

“Since 1995, the proportion of recruits who failed their physical exams because they were overweight has risen by nearly 70 percent,” retired Army General John M. Shalikashvili, the former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote in the report.

In North Carolina, about 28 percent of high school students are overweight or obese, according to a [2015 report card compiled by Prevention Partners](#), and only 12.3 percent of people eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

“We won’t be able to defend ourselves,” said Rep. Grier Martin (D-Raleigh), who served two years in the Army in Afghanistan. “Of course, it’s a health care issue, but it’s important to realize the truly important national security aspect of the issue.”

Sen. Louis Pate (R-Mt Olive), who served in the Air Force in Vietnam, said O’Connell has a compelling argument.

“I think it would be very helpful if we could get something like that into food deserts,” he said, noting that he went over to Roberson’s store last year and liked what he saw.

But he remained noncommittal when asked about the appropriation’s chances.

“I think it’s probably something that we’re taking a hard look at,” he said. “It could have a big payoff.”