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# Tax credit may lure grocers to urban sites

By Laura Baverman — lbaverman@enquirer.com — January 28, 2011

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Ohio state Sen. Eric Kearney said Friday he'd introduce a bill to provide tax incentives to grocers willing to open stores in neighborhoods without access to healthy foods.

— The bill reflects similar efforts underway in 11 other states around the nation. Grocers would receive a 10 percent credit on the state's commercial activity tax to open up in areas considered food deserts within Ohio. Locally, qualifying areas include Roselawn and Clifton, where stores have recently closed, as well as Avondale and Bond Hill.

"It's a positive approach," said Kearney, himself a North Avondale resident, as he stood before a small crowd of community leaders outside a boarded up Kroger store in Roselawn. "It encourages grocery stores to come back."

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Improving access to nearby food in urban neighborhoods has been a priority of the Center for Closing the Health Gap (CCHG) and a city of Cincinnati task force since 2009. The two groups determined the widest gaps between grocery stores in the region occurred in areas with a high percentage of African American, senior or low-income populations. Those neighborhoods also had increasing problems with obesity among adults and children.

The Clifton IGA store closed earlier this month when its owner failed to pay state sales taxes, although it may reopen. Kroger last April closed its Roselawn location, where Kearney and others held a news conference Friday, after losing money for a decade. It has warned that stores in Walnut Hills and Over-the-Rhine aren't profitable, but has made investments to improve their quality and selection.

Kroger spokeswoman Rachael Betzler said the Walnut Hills store is still losing money. But Kroger will this year begin construction on a new and expanded urban store in Corryville.

"We haven't seen the new bill," she wrote in an e-mail. "But we do appreciate Senator Kearney's efforts and look forward to speaking further with him."

CCHG founder Dwight Tillery called the local food desert issue a social injustice. Roselawn residents without cars now must make two bus transfers to get to the nearest grocery store. To pick up their prescriptions at the nearby Walgreens, seniors must cross a major intersection of heavy traffic.

"Those are kinds of issues that weren't considered when (Kroger) abruptly closed this store," said Cincinnati Councilman Cecil Thomas. He'll introduce a resolution at next week's City Council meeting to support Kearney's efforts.

CCHG has been working to solve some issues. Last June, it received a portion of federal stimulus funds from Hamilton County's Communities Putting Prevention to Work project. The money would allow it to partner with faith-based organizations to launch community gardens, nutrition and fitness education programs and food markets in areas

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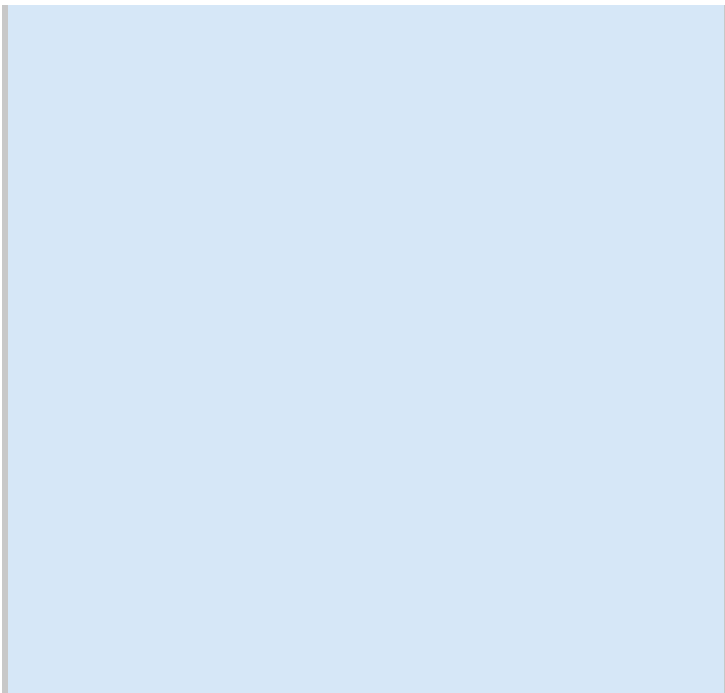
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underserved by traditional grocery stores.

Several initiatives have already begun, including a garden and market at Roselawn Lutheran Church. By Feb. 14, the center will have identified all 20 churches to move forward in the program, said Renee Mahaffey Harris, the center's executive director.

This spring, an organization called the Food Trust will come to town to help the center consider a retail model that was successfully implemented in Pennsylvania's urban areas.

Said Kearney, "I'm very confident we can move the needle."



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