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Senator Morales Sponsors Bill to Improve Health and Create Jobs

The Manny Herrera Healthy Food Act Now Before the New Mexico Legislature

Santa Fe, New Mexico (February 6, 2008) – Senator Howie C. Morales (D – Silver City) announced today that he is carrying the Manny Herrera Healthy Food Act (HB 180) now before the New Mexico Legislature. The bill, named in honor of the former Representative Manuel Herrera, will provide \$10 million for economic development activities that will make healthy food more affordable to more New Mexicans and stimulate job growth in the state’s retail food sector.

“One of my mentors, Manny Herrera, passed away late last year,” said Senator Morales, “and to honor his legacy I am proud to work for a bill that he shaped in the final months of a long and productive life of service to the citizens of New Mexico.”

New Mexico rural counties have long been challenged by the lack of affordable food stores and markets that provide a selection of nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy food. As a result, rural residents must travel up to 60 miles or more one-way to retail outlets that carry what they need to promote a healthy life.

According to a 2007 study by the Rural Sociological Society, New Mexico has 12 rural counties where more than half of the residents must travel 10 miles or more to get to a good food store. Eight of those counties including Hidalgo and Catron counties, according to the Society, are considered “food deserts” because all the residents must

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travel more than 10 miles to a food store.

“Many of our state’s residents live in beautiful areas with strong traditions of self-reliance,” said Senator Morales, “but without affordable places to buy healthy food, they are increasingly susceptible to overweight, obesity, and diabetes.”

New Mexico spends \$324 million each year on diet-related illnesses that stem from obesity, much of which comes from public funds like Medicaid. Over the past 15 years the actual price (adjusted for inflation) of fresh fruits and vegetables has risen nearly 40 percent while the actual price of high-fat, high-sugar products like soft drinks and snacks has declined by 15 percent.

“The price of healthy food is increasing everyday,” said Pam Roy, co-director of Farm to Table, a Santa Fe-based non-profit that is advocating for several legislative measures that address the devastating effect of diet-related diseases. “We did a market-basket price comparison in 2006 that found rural residents pay up to 65 percent more for their food than residents living in metro areas. This is primarily because the rural stores are small, isolated and don’t have easy access to the wholesale food,” she added.

“What I like about this bill,” said Senator Morales, “is that it addresses economic conditions as much as health problems. If we can invest a small amount of public money in an existing store in say Hidalgo or Catron counties, they will be able to bring in more healthy food, generate more economic activity, and create more jobs.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which has conducted extensive research on the relationship between health and access to food stores, has strongly recommended that governments promote the expansion of retail grocery operations.

Farm to Table’s Roy cited examples in both Dulce and Dixon where seed capital led to the development of new grocery stores. “The Pennsylvania legislature created a program in 2004,” noted Roy, “that has so far produced one million square feet of new retail food space and 2,500 new jobs in both urban and rural communities.”

“Helping our communities to help themselves and to live fuller and healthier lives,” said Senator Morales, “is what Manny Herrera always wanted for his constituents. This bill does just that.”

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