

Keeping WA's Small-Town Grocers Alive and Thriving

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : November 26, 2010 at 5:10 am

A quick run to the corner store is an errand no longer possible in many parts of rural Washington, as small-town grocers close up shop, unable to compete with superstores in larger cities. Two new studies from the *Center for Rural Affairs* explore the trend. They examine why small-town stores are important for better access to healthy foods - and for keeping rural economies healthy, too.

Report author Jon Bailey, the *Center's* rural research and analysis program director, examined different retail ownership models. He says he has found some interesting, non-traditional strategies that can succeed.

"We've seen cooperative efforts work in some places. Some community schools have started grocery stores. There are also student-run grocery stores and community-owned grocery stores."

Bailey's research found a certain population level is needed for a store's success - about 3,500, and with many rural communities shrinking, it's tougher for small grocers to stay in business. Downsides to the store closings, according to Bailey, include a loss of local tax dollars - and also a loss of character, because local stores serve as community gathering places.

Shopper preferences have changed, and chain supermarkets can offer better prices for those who can make the trip to a bigger town. However, Bailey points out that travel is not always possible.

"If it is 20, 30 or 40 or more miles away, then you have some access - but some people don't, and it's much harder for other people."

The research found more than 800 counties across the country where residents are more than 10 miles from the nearest grocery store - 12 of them in Washington. They include Skamania and Klickitat counties and every county on the state's eastern border, with the exception of Spokane.

The reports, "Rural Grocery Stores: Importance and Challenges," and "Rural Grocery Stores: Ownership Models that Work," are available at www.cfra.org.