UNK group’s project will open store in Cody

KEARNEY — A declining population of 177 in one of the more isolated towns in Nebraska would make even the savviest entrepreneur think twice about starting a new business.

But the University of Nebraska at Kearney entrepreneurial student program, Students in Free Enterprise, is helping mobilize youths from Cody-Kilgore Unified Schools and citizens of the community to open a grocery store, which will serve not only Cody but also the surrounding communities in Cherry County.

Currently, an estimated 300 people from Cody, Kilgore, Merriman and the surrounding area have to make an 80-mile round trip to the nearest town through the Sandhills to get their groceries.

Fittingly, the proposed grocery store is in a straw-bale building.

“The biggest endeavor for this store is to revitalize the community,” said Kasey Dietz, a UNK student from Morrill, who is the project leader. “New employment opportunities will emerge with the creation of a new business, and the local store will improve the local economy by citizens spending their money in Cody.”

Located between Gordon and Valentine, the Cody store is expected to have increased business during the summer months when tourists travel U.S. Highway 20 on their way to the Niobrara River and area attractions.

“This grocery store is being set up as an entrepreneurial center,” Dietz said. “There is a classroom within the store as well as a small office space. Any small business will be able to utilize the small office space for day-to-day operations or administrative work.”

The SIFE team is working primarily with a Cody-Kilgore High School student steering committee to help the students gain a greater understanding of entrepreneurship and basic business practices.

The goal of having the students learn these skills is to allow them to manage the administrative duties of the store, Dietz said.

Last month, members of the SIFE team conducted a one-day workshop at the school to help students and Cody citizens create a business plan for the grocery store. Community members and students were divided into groups to write the different sections of the business plan, including the background, management/operations, marketing and financial.

The collaboration between the steering committee and the UNK SIFE team will continue through the groundbreaking in the spring and the grocery store’s first year of operation.