

Tax on sugary drinks a good first step to healthy Hawaii

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FILE - In this Sept. 15, 2011 file photo, soda is poured from a can in Philadelphia. The Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday, May 30, 2012 rejected the Corn Refiners Association's bid to rename its sweetening agent "corn sugar." The FDA said that it defines sugar as a solid, dried and crystallized food -- not a syrup. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

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The Hawaii Legislature is currently considering two bills that would increase the price of sugar-sweetened beverages.

The bill proposed by the governor (Senate Bill 1085) would place a 1-cent-per-ounce fee on all beverages with pre-added caloric sweetener. While Hawaii's doctors and public health researchers have long touted this type of intervention as a necessary component of a comprehensive approach to address obesity, previous attempts to get such a bill through the Legislature have been unsuccessful. This year the tide has turned.

At a recent hearing, more than two-thirds of the testimony was in favor of passing the bill. Those testifying included physicians, medical students, professors, business owners and concerned citizens. Their sentiment mirrors that of the general public.

In a recent survey of more than 1,300 Hawaii adults, two-thirds of the respondents were in favor of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, if the funds were used for obesity prevention programs. The governor's bill would do just that by creating an obesity prevention special fund.

The case for taxing sugar-sweetened beverage is clear. Currently more than half of Hawaii adults are obese or overweight. Additionally, a third of children entering kindergarten in Hawaii are overweight or obese. An estimated \$470 million is spent annually on obesity-related health problems in Hawaii. We all pay for these costs. Business owners bear the brunt of the obesity epidemic by paying for health care coverage for their employees. Taxpayers pay for the costs of obesity through state worker benefits, Medicaid and Medicare.

Sugar-sweetened beverages, unlike almost all other foods and beverages, provide no essential nutrients, yet they make up 10-15 percent of the calories in our children's diet. Drinking one 12-ounce soft drink per day increases a child's odds of becoming obese by 60 percent. A study of 4- to 11-year-olds found that replacing sugar-sweetened beverages with non-caloric beverages significantly reduced weight gain and body fat.

Among adults, consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is associated with a risk of weight gain and obesity and a significantly higher risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and pancreatic cancer. All of these diseases are



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preventable, yet they make up many of the leading causes of death in Hawaii.

The proposed fee of 1 cent per ounce is expected to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages by 8-10 percent. The impact on youth is expected to be even higher. This fee is expected to generate over \$37 million annually. These funds will be used to address obesity prevention in the community.

An essential element of this is changing our environment to make being active and eating healthy the easy choice. Proposed uses include increased physical education in schools with trained PE teachers, increased parks and park maintenance, safer areas to walk and bike, more locally grown produce, better access to farmers' markets and health communications campaigns to inform the public about making healthy choices.

If this bill does not pass, we can expect increasing rates of obesity in our communities along with escalating health care costs for everyone.

If obesity is not addressed in a comprehensive manner, this generation could live a shorter life span than their parents and the cost of health care could bankrupt the state.

We need to do something now to ensure a healthy Hawaii. This bill is an essential first step.

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