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Will food stamp plan to ban soda fizzle?

by [Liz Rhoades](#) , Managing Editor

In another attempt to improve the health of New Yorkers, Mayor Bloomberg is asking the federal government to temporarily ban sugared soda from the food stamp program, but the plan's not going down easy with all groups. Diet drinks would still be allowed.

Although health groups and doctors are applauding the measure as a way to fight obesity, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger and the American Beverage Association are not swallowing it. They say it's too much government interference.

The plan was announced on Thursday at City Hall with the mayor joined by Gov. Paterson and the city and state health commissioners. The governor supports the measure, which is vital since the state administers the federal food stamps program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for the city. The request was sent to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Under Bloomberg's plan, the ban would apply for two years and the city would aggressively study the impact on the health of New Yorkers.

"In spite of the great gains we've made over the past eight years in making our communities healthier, there are still two areas where we're losing ground — obesity and diabetes," Bloomberg said. "We have to continue developing new strategies and initiatives to complement what has already been done."

Paterson indicated the use of food stamps to purchase sugary drinks "not only contradicts the intent of this vital program, but it also subsidizes a serious public health epidemic."

Under the proposal, recipients of food stamps in the city would continue to receive the same amount of benefits, but would not be able to use food stamps to purchase sugary beverages. The drinks are defined as containing more than 10 calories per eight ounces. With a 12-ounce soda, which contains 150 calories, the equivalent is digesting 10 packets of sugar without any other nutrients.

Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Linda Gibbs said at the press conference that sugary drinks are the single largest contributor to the obesity epidemic. In New York City, nearly 40 percent of public school students through the eighth grade are overweight or obese.

Adults fare even worse, with 57 percent listed as obese or overweight, leading to such serious health problems as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

City Human Resources Administration Commissioner Robert Doar said government should not be in the business of subsidizing poor health habits that end up costing taxpayers through higher Medicaid and Medicare costs. Nationally, the cost of treating obesity-related illnesses is more than \$70 billion.

But Joel Berg, executive director of the NYC Coalition Against Hunger, said a much better approach to the problem is to take action to make healthier food more affordable and available to those receiving food stamps. "Low-income people want what we all want: the ability to make their own smart choices and to improve their own lives," Berg said.

He doesn't believe such a ban would reduce obesity. "A much fairer alternative," Berg believes, "is to increase the purchase power" for the food stamp program and ensure that more stores accept those benefits and stock healthier foods in poor neighborhoods.

The American Beverage Association, which earlier this year helped defeat the governor's proposed tax on sugary beverages, also opposes Bloomberg's plan. "This is just another attempt by government to tell New Yorkers what they should eat or drink," said spokeswoman Tracey Halliday.

Most health experts, however, believe the change would be beneficial. Dr. Anthony Porto, a pediatric gastroenterologist who runs the Fit Kids program at New York Hospital Queens in



Mayor Bloomberg at the podium last week at City Hall with Dr. Richard Daines, left, state health commissioner, and Gov. Paterson. PHOTO BY EDWARD REED

Flushing, says that anything that can promote awareness to avoid obesity is a good thing.

“These beverages are not vital and provide little if any nutritional benefit,” Porto said. “They are just empty calories and this would not be a punishment.”

He also would like to see more nutrition education taught to children and to get families involved. “It would be very useful if nutrition was taught in school and then children would bring home what they learned to the family,” Porto said, “like the importance of drinking more water.”

He believes a change in eating patterns can have a major impact on reducing obesity. “This is a good opportunity,” the doctor said, “and worth a try.”

A spokesman for the USDA said the mayor’s proposal will be carefully considered. But based on past action, it is believed unlikely the agency will change its policy.

In 2004, the USDA denied a similar request from Minnesota to prevent food stamps from being used to buy junk food. The agency said such a plan would perpetuate the myth that food stamp users make poor shopping choices.

However, the USDA does prohibit the use of food stamps to buy prepared food or beer, wine or liquor.

Berg, of the hunger coalition, believes the proposal will ultimately be rejected because the USDA has no authority to unilaterally ban food and soda that are allowed in the program under existing federal laws.

Instead of trying to change the food stamp program, his group supports the mayor’s efforts to subsidize street vendors, encouraging them to sell fresh produce in low-income areas and to also promote more food-producing community gardens.

“The problem isn’t that low-income people make bad food choices,” Berg said. “The problem is that they can’t afford to make healthier choices.”

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