

New York Soda Tax Would Hurt, Not Help, Low-income Families

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by *Carly Rothman*

Some powerful New York officials are throwing their weight behind a proposed soda tax, arguing the added cost — an extra penny per ounce — will deter consumption, fight obesity and reduce health care costs.

The *New York Times* editorial board also supports the tax, saying it would help limit soda intake in low-income neighborhoods where diet-related diseases are particularly prevalent.

“Poorer people, who lack healthy food choices, too often overload on sugar-laden soft drinks,” read [an editorial in the paper last week](#).

But the [dearth of choices](#) is just the point. The reason low-income consumers disproportionately suffer from obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases is that soft drinks, fast food and other foods and beverages high in added sugars and fats are cheaper and more readily available than healthier alternatives.

The soda tax might make the sugary drinks less appealing, but it would do nothing to lower the cost of healthy alternatives like milk or vitamin-rich juices, nor improve food access in neighborhoods without supermarkets or grocery stores.

In other words, the regressive soda tax supported by Governor Paterson and Mayor Bloomberg would punish low-income families for buying soda without offering better alternatives. Meanwhile, the tax will cut into families’ limited food dollars, making it even harder to afford healthy foods like fruit, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products and legumes.

Both the Governor and Mayor note the tax will create an important revenue stream during the ongoing fiscal crisis. We are sensitive to this need — particularly since Mayor Bloomberg has threatened, in response to proposed state budget cuts, [to eliminate all city funding for emergency food assistance](#).

And helping people make healthy diet choices is an important part of the Food Bank’s work. [CookShop](#) [CookShop](#), our [nutrition and health education](#) program, teaches more than 15,000 New Yorkers of all ages about [how to read food labels](#) and make healthy, cost-effective food purchases. Our social marketing campaign, which reaches more than 100,000 low-income teens, urges them to “[Change One Thing](#),” swapping junk food for healthy alternatives — and specifically encouraging [a switch to water from sugary drinks](#).

While we applaud public officials’ desire to fight diet-related disease and steer consumers away from soda, we urge them to do so by expanding poor consumers’ options, not limiting them.

Existing programs like the [FRESH \(Food Retail Expansion to Support Health\) initiative](#) would provide incentives for supermarkets and grocery stores to open and expand in high-need neighborhoods — and require them to accept [food stamps](#) and [WIC](#) benefits to ensure they remain affordable and accessible to low-income consumers. New York’s [Healthy Food/Healthy Communities Initiative](#) would help finance store improvements to increase capacity for sales of fresh, healthy food.

Measures like these, which lift barriers, expand choice and empower individuals, should be the approach of all food policy — not programs that hurt the people they aim to help.

For more information, read our [testimony before the State Senate Health Committee on the sugar-sweetened beverage tax](#).

Share your thoughts: what do you think about the impact of the soda tax on low-income New Yorkers?