



New tax could target sugary drinks

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With health care costs in Texas and the nation going up — and waistlines expanding right along with them — the menu is being revised regarding food and politics.

Politicians, public interest groups and the food and beverage industries are trying to control how much you pay for what you eat and drink, and if certain foods — like sugary drinks — should be subject to additional taxes.

A variation of the old phrase "you are what you eat" may now be "you vote how you eat."

When counting calories, elections count.

After first lady Michelle Obama unveiled her campaign to fight childhood obesity, the Dallas ISD suddenly found more community support for its menu changes of more fruit and salads and fewer fried and fatty foods.

"I think all of that is being influenced by the Let's Move initiative," said Dora Rivas, who is in charge of Food and Child Nutrition Services at DISD.

But the healthier menus cost local taxpayers \$2 million more this year. And federal taxpayers could pay more, too.

President Obama wants \$10 billion more over 10 years for child nutrition — although Congress is looking at less.

"We're hoping that Congress will be able to reauthorize our program with that increased funding and more support toward nutritional education," Rivas said.

When Congress opened debate about a soda tax to help pay for the new health care law, it raised the arguments over food and politics and personal choices to a new level, well beyond the confines of an existing program like school lunches.

Those supporting the tax say there's enough evidence linking sugary drinks to weight gain, heart disease and diabetes.

But the soft drink, food and restaurant lobbies disagreed, casting it as unfair tax.

Led by the American Beverage Association, they produced a TV ad with an actress playing a mother with a message: "Washington, if you're listening, what doesn't seem like much to you, can be lot to us."

The American Beverage Association spent \$5.4 million lobbying Congress against a soda tax in the first three months of this year. That compares to spending of just \$140,000 last year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

And it paid off.

The soda tax at the federal level, went flat and died.

The ABA didn't respond to an interview request.

Some cities and states still consider the soda tax a sweet idea, although none has yet approved it.

When the Texas legislature convenes in January, don't be surprised if there's a bill filed for a soda tax — something that would set off a real political food fight in Texas.

A penny an ounce tax on a sugar-sweetened soda in Texas would raise nearly \$620 million a year, according to the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities in Austin advocates for the low income taxpayer, and says a soda tax would make the state budget (and Texans) healthier.

"If you make the tax high enough that you are going to see a decrease in sweetened beverage consumption, and that in turn is going to lead to less weight gain per year and lower rates of obesity both among children and adults," said Celia Hagert, a policy analyst for the organization.

A soda tax would raise the price for a 20-ounce bottle 20 cents. A 12-pack of 12 ounce cans would be \$1.44 more.

But Justin Keener, with the conservative-leaning Texas Public Policy Foundation, calls a soda tax a bad idea. "Those taxes would only be paid for by households, and the last thing that a typical Texas household needs right now is money taken out of its budget and instead going into government coffers for some program," he said.

Beyond the taxing question, there's the broader debate of how far should the government go in controlling individual behavior.

"In the cases of alcohol and cigarette taxes — particularly cigarette taxes — they worked," Hagert said. "It was a successful intervention that got people to smoke less."

Keener makes another argument. "We need to be free to make good decisions and bad decisions; that's what freedom is all about," he said.

But with government budgets and bellies bulging, the arguments over food, freedom and health costs will keep bursting.

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