

Passing the soda tax would help prevent devastating health-care cuts

The much discussed penny-per-ounce "soda tax" under consideration in Albany will not only help Westchester County combat childhood obesity, but also provide the county with \$34.2 million to fund critically important public health and health-care services and save 1,250 health-care jobs right here in Westchester. Yet it remains in limbo in budget politics in Albany. It is good public health policy. Yet its timing under these budget circumstances make its inclusion uncertain.

Soda consumption has almost tripled over the past four decades from 70 calories per person per day in the late 1970s, to 190 calories today. This consumption explosion has helped trigger an increase in obesity and related illnesses like Type 2 diabetes. No less than 88 studies have shown that drinking sugar-sweetened beverages is linked to increased weight gain and obesity. Today obesity is a public health crisis in New York state — an incredible 60 percent of adults and one-third of children are either overweight or obese. Type 2 diabetes, which is a direct result of being overweight, has doubled in New York since 1994; the state Health Department estimates that by 2050 it will double again. The cost of treating diabetes every year in New York is an astonishing \$7.4 billion — higher than anywhere else in the country.

Grim numbers

Westchester is hardly immune to the state's devastating obesity and diabetes epidemics. A 2008-09 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey report sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention found that 55,400 Westchester adults or 7.7 percent of Westchester's adult population has been diagnosed with diabetes. Equally as alarming, the report found that 139,700 adults in Westchester or 20.3 percent are obese.

The soda tax will help reduce New Yorkers' consumption of these exceptionally unhealthy drinks, which have been so heavily linked to diabetes and obesity, more so than any other food group. A study by University of Buffalo researchers released recently showed that taxing unhealthy food is a more effective way to fight obesity than making healthy foods like fruit and vegetables more affordable. And according to the New England Journal of Medicine, a penny-per-ounce tax could reduce consumption by as much as 10 percent. That would help the average New Yorker avoid two to three pounds of weight gain per year. We all know how hard it is to lose weight, and that the best strategy is to not put the weight on in the first place. But the sugary beverage tax won't just help combat obesity and make New Yorkers healthier, it will also prevent devastating cuts to vital health-care services in Westchester County.

Looming cuts

Without revenue from the sugar-sweetened beverage tax, Westchester could lose almost 1,250 health-care jobs; Rockland County, 330; Putnam County, 99; and Orange County, 215, according to data from Greater New York Hospital Association. Statewide, almost 29,000 jobs would be lost. With New York experiencing an 8.8 percent unemployment rate — the highest in more than 17 years — and Westchester County currently experiencing a 7.7 percent unemployment rate, the highest in the Lower Hudson Valley, we can't afford to lose thousands of critical health-care jobs in our community. That

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kind of job loss among our health-care workers puts the health of every Westchester resident at risk.

Across the state, the tax will raise an estimated \$450 million for public health and health-care services in 2010-11, and an estimated \$1 billion the following year — critical funding for New York during a massive fiscal crisis. With 30 hospitals closing across the state since 2000, thousands of health-care layoffs, and health-care costs continuing their unprecedented rise, it's more important than ever for Albany to do everything possible to protect the health of every New Yorker. The soda tax is a quadruple win for Westchester County. It's good fiscal policy and good public health policy. It will avoid potentially devastating cuts to our public health and health-care systems that would put people's lives in danger. It would help lower our obesity rate as well as lower the cost of obesity-related medical expenditures that every taxpayer is paying for. And, much like the tobacco tax, it will encourage healthier lifestyle choices so people can live longer, healthier and fuller lives.

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