

# Richmond Confidential

## [County urging kids to stay away from soda](#)

By: [Ian Stewart](#) June 30, 2010

It may be getting a lot warmer out these days, but county officials want to urge thirsty sunbathers not to reach for a cold soda to cool off.

County Supervisor John Gioia, whose District 1 includes Richmond, El Cerrito and Kensington, last week introduced a countywide campaign to declare the next three months a “Soda-Free Summer” throughout the county. The campaign is designed to combat obesity rates by discouraging children from drinking soda pop or other sugary drinks.

“It’s more urgent than ever for us to put out this message about soda in lower-income communities where the negative impacts of soda consumption are the greatest,” Gioia said. “So in communities like Richmond that have been disproportionately impacted by [obesity and diabetes rates], it’s really important to have this message going out to parents that soda consumption has really negative health impacts.”

The campaign comes in the wake of a UCLA research [study](#) that shows that children who drink one or more cans of soda per day are 27 percent more likely to become obese as adults. Statewide, half of all teenagers drink at least one soda per day, according to Andrea Menefee, a nutrition program manager with the county’s health department.

The Soda-Free Summer program, produced by the nonprofit [Bay Area Nutrition and Physical Activity Collaborative](#), has been going on for three years now, but the current countywide campaign to publicize it, through informational flyers and public-service addresses, is supposedly the first of its kind in the Bay Area. San Mateo, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Alameda and Marin counties are all planning similar programs this summer, as well, according to a press release from Gioia’s office.

County staff will distribute “pledge cards” to children, asking them to promise to stay away from sugary drinks. At the end of the summer, kids who’ve turned in a pledge card will be eligible for a prize-drawing. Gioia estimated that the campaign would reach more than 100,000 county residents.

According to a recent study conducted by the [California Center for Public Health Advocacy](#), slightly fewer adults (28.4 percent) and children (46.1 percent) in Richmond drink at least one soda per day than the state average. Contra Costa County is near the middle of the state’s counties in terms of both soda consumption and obesity rates. However a 2007 county survey showed that 35.3 percent of fifth-grade children in the West County school district are overweight, which is nearly 7 percent higher than the county average. The WCCUSD also has one of the highest percentage of students receiving low- or no-cost school lunches of any district in the county.

Schools statewide stopped selling soda pop in campus vending machines more than five years ago, and most school districts adhere to strict guidelines regulating the caloric content of the food and beverages they serve. Most free school meals in the [WCCUSD](#) come with milk or water, according to the district’s Web site.

Tim Chambers, the principal at Salesian Catholic High School in Richmond, which, too, has banned selling soda on campus, said he rarely sees kids drinking sodas at school anymore. Most kids drink bottled water, juice or Gatorade at lunchtime, he said.

“It’s a good idea,” Chambers said of staying away from too much soda pop. “Whether or not it’s the law, it’s just a good idea to limit access to high-sugar beverages on campus.”

Whereas schools appear to have largely conquered kids' soda-drinking habits while on campus, Gioia says there's still work to getting soda-buying parents to change their ways.

"It's one thing if [soda is] a special thing, once a week," he said, "But what we're seeing is that it becomes like part of people's diet."

The county's campaign comes in the midst of what appears to be strong sentiment, both locally and statewide, against soda pop. A [Field Poll](#) released last week suggested that 56 percent of voters statewide – and closer to 60 percent in the Bay Area – would support legislation to tax cans of soda to fund programs to fight childhood obesity.

State Senate Bill [1210](#), introduced by Dean Florez [D-Bakersfield] was being debated in the state's upper house, but appears to have stalled out. A similar bill ([AB-2100](#)) is now being considered in the assembly. Gioia said he would support a bill to tax soda, and that he, too, has considered the legality of introducing a tax on soda at the county level. Several other states and cities have [considered](#) soda taxes, too.

"Realistically, anybody that passes a soda fee is going to be sued," Gioia said. "But if a whole coalition of jurisdictions do this together ... that's something we're looking at. Everything's incremental. This [county campaign] is really designed to draw attention to the issue."

In Richmond, Vice Mayor Jeff Ritterman said he, too, has debated proposing a fee or a tax on soda pop with the city attorney's office. While he said he'd like to use a soda tax to create a revenue stream to fund community "victory gardens" in Richmond's schools, there are still a number of questions remaining about whether or not the city might become vulnerable to a lawsuit from the beverage industry should it try to tax soda.

"We're still working on it," Ritterman said. "We're still talking about it. A state-level or national-level [tax] would make sense, too, because this issue of childhood obesity is just a terrible, terrible problem."