

# Soda tax has sweet sound for cash-strapped schools

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Buy a Coke. Save a classroom.

A study released Thursday estimates that a 1-cent-per-ounce tax on sugary sodas and other sweetened drinks would return \$233 per student to California classrooms and fund childhood obesity prevention initiatives.

"The science linking sugary drinks to the obesity epidemic is rock solid," said study author Harold Goldstein, with the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, who is a leading proponent behind the largely successful removal of junk food and sodas from school vending machines and cafeterias. "It's time to make sure that the cost of these beverages includes the social cost of the harm they are doing."

The study is based on AB 669 by Assemblyman Bill Monning, D-Carmel, which would raise \$1.7 billion statewide every year and send 85 percent of that to schools and local agencies and 15 percent to state-run anti-obesity programs.

At a penny an ounce, Californians would need to buy the equivalent of 14 billion 12-ounce cans of soda, an average of a little more than a can a day for every man, woman and child in the state.

If adopted, the tax would raise an estimated \$39 million for Contra Costa County alone and millions of dollars in other Bay Area counties, according to the center's analysis.

The money would help fill the gap left by school cuts and help teach children healthful eating and lifestyle habits through education and sports programs, say soda tax proponents.

"Soda has become the new tobacco," said Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond. "It took us a while to get to the point where we linked the negative health implications of tobacco on public health, and we know that the taxes on cigarettes are working to reduce smoking."

A soda tax -- applied to all beverages with added sugar and fructose corn syrup -- has been debated for years.

The Obama administration floated it as part of its federal health care reform package, but the concept collapsed under heavy industry lobbying.

Now, in an era of serious government deficits around the country, a growing number of states and cities are taking a closer look at a soda tax, including California, Texas, Vermont, Philadelphia and Seattle.

In Contra Costa, San Pablo Councilman Leonard McNeil has voiced support for such a tax, although Gioia prefers a statewide approach.

AB 669 is scheduled for a legislative committee hearing Monday in Sacramento but has two major hurdles: a two-thirds vote requirement and universal Republican opposition.

A legislative-approved tax would need at least four GOP votes, although proponents could pursue a statewide ballot initiative. A recent Field Poll found that 56 percent of those asked supported a soda tax.

It's a bad idea, countered said Jon Coupal, with the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

Soda drinkers vastly outnumber smokers, a dwindling population whose ostracized members are accustomed to paying cigarette taxes, he said.

"It's the stupidest thing to come down the pike," Coupal said. "Why are we singling out this form of carbohydrate for taxation? What's next? A bread tax? A pizza tax? At the end of the day, this effort is a combination of bad fiscal policy with nannyism in government."

Classroom dollars and soda consumption have no ties, said Contra Costa Taxpayers Association Executive Director Kris Hunt.

"It's another case of ballot-box budgeting that doesn't make any sense," Hunt said.

Goldstein disagrees on both fronts.

The nation is in the midst of a "\$41 billion obesity epidemic and at the same time there are massive state and local budget deficits, where education and health programs are being cut and threatened with additional cuts. Many people see soda taxes as a way to prevent these cuts."

Soda would seem to be a lucrative source of cash. The average American consumes 278 more calories per day than he or she did 30 years ago, a recent study by UC Berkeley's California Center for Weight and Health.

Nearly half of those calories come from sugary beverages, Goldstein said. The average American consumes 50 gallons a year of sugary beverages or 39 pounds of sugar.

Unlike a wedge of chocolate cake, Goldstein explained, calories in liquids don't trigger in our bodies the same level of satiation as those from solid food.