Obesity risk looms more than quakes

Posted on Sat, Mar. 19, 2005

By Peter Felsenfeld CONTRA COSTA TIMES

CONCORD - When it comes to impending disasters, junk food and inactivity may pose a greater threat than the massive temblor haunting the California consciousness.

A significant earthquake is expected to bring 120,000 deaths and casualties sometime during the next 30 years, said Dr. Alexander Kelter, a specialist with the state Department of Health Services. By comparison, during that period, he said, more than 180,000 Californians will die of diabetes, a condition related to obesity.

That doesn't include deaths from strokes, heart attacks and other ill health effects caused by being overweight.

"The Big One won't be measured on the Richter scale; it'll be measured on the bathroom scale," Kelter said.

Kelter made his remarks Friday at the Concord Holiday Inn to more than 20 civic leaders gathered to craft policies aimed at reducing obesity in the region. Sponsored by the Center for Public Health Advocacy, the meeting included state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, and several city council and school board members from around the county.

Almost 30 percent of Contra Costa seventh-graders exceed the normal body mass index, and 35 percent failed a standard aerobic test, according to the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates.

Some East Bay leaders have already made efforts to address the problem. Contra Costa supervisors last year passed an ordinance requiring healthy alternatives in all county-owned vending machines.

Torlakson, a former coach and triathlete, unsuccessfully lobbied for a similar measure at the state level. Fighting obesity requires an aggressive public health campaign equal to past efforts to combat smoking and drunken driving, he said.

About one of every 50 people contracted diabetes in 1945, Torlakson said. The chances are one in three people today, he said, and even greater among African-Americans and Latinos.

"The numbers are startling," he said. "This needs to be a wake-up call for all of us."

State health officials offered the leaders concrete legislative strategies to counter the billions of advertising dollars and sophisticated marketing strategies employed by candy and soda giants.

Part of the solution could lie in community planning through the creation of opportunities for biking and walking to reduce car trips, Kelter said.

In addition, local governments can limit the allowable density of fast food restaurants, especially near schools, said Harold Goldstein of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. Orinda has such an ordinance.

In addition, Goldstein said, schools should refrain from accepting sponsorships from firms that sell unhealthy food.

"It's just sending the wrong message," he said. "At least on public property, we shouldn't be doing junk food companies a favor and endorsing their products."

Food stamp recipients, the leaders said, tend to buy and eat more fruits and vegetables than low-income people not in the program, who are more likely to rely on fast food. About half the eligible Contra Costa residents don't receive the service, Gioia said. "We need to get those people signed up."

Friday's meeting came one day after the New England Journal of Medicine reported that obesity threatens to dramatically reduce life expectancy for the first time in centuries.

The group agreed to meet again and explore other approaches. Contra Costa County School Superintendent Joseph Ovick applauded the spirit of cooperation.

"This is the first time local government and the state agree on where to cut the fat."

Peter Felsenfeld covers Contra Costa County. Reach him at 925-977-8506 or pfelsenfeld@cctimes.com.