



Step Up, Bloomington, and Be a Leader

Indiana has the distinction of being the sixth most obese state in the second fattest country in the world.

While I'm guessing Bloomington is one of the healthier communities in Indiana, we could still do a lot more to reduce the scourge of obesity, the root cause of many illnesses, most notably diabetes. That disease alone is costing taxpayers a fortune and killing people in large numbers.

One significant step would be to tax sugary sodas and other sugar-sweetened beverages.

In November 2014, Berkeley, California, became the first U.S. municipality to pass such a law. The Berkeley measure levies a 1 cent per ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages including sodas and energy drinks, juices with added sugar, and sugar-sweetened syrups that go into drinks at places like Starbucks. The Berkeley measure was on a referendum that passed overwhelmingly with the backing of 75 percent of voters.

A similar referendum in San Francisco failed, even though 54.5 percent of voters supported the tax. A two-thirds majority was required because the revenue would have gone to a special fund for recreation and nutrition programs in schools and parks. If the revenue had been designated for the general fund, a simple majority vote would have sufficed.

Not surprisingly, the American Beverage Association strongly opposed both referendum measures, in the process spending \$2.4 million in Berkeley and \$9.1 million in San Francisco.

The fattest country in the world these days — having recently overtaken the U.S. for the honor — is Mexico. On January 1, 2014, the Mexican government did something about it, imposing a 1 peso (7 cents) per liter tax on sugary drinks.

Results in Mexico for the first three months of 2014 are encouraging, showing a decline of 10 percent in the purchase of sugary drinks. A concurrent increase of 7 percent in the purchase of healthier

beverages, like milk and pure fruit juices, is also noteworthy.

We need to see this kind of improvement in the U.S., where one-third of children and two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese, and 29 million people — 9.3 percent of the population — have diabetes.

A total of 234,051 people in the U.S. died directly or indirectly from diabetes in 2010. The cost of diagnosing and treating the disease for one year was \$245 billion, about the same as the annual cost of maintaining the U.S. military presence around the globe, including troops, equipment, fleets, and bases overseas.

"Diabetes and obesity are wreaking havoc on public health in this country. It's a personal and economic disaster," Roberta Friedman, director of public policy for the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, told the *International Business Times*. Taxing sugary drinks, she says, is a "good public health measure."

Bloomington and Berkeley have a lot in common, both being progressive, health-conscious college towns. However, in California, any citizen or organization that collects enough signatures can get just about any proposal on a ballot. Not so in Indiana, where referendums are limited to topics such as schools, bonds, and construction.

It wasn't that long ago that the late Dr. Tony Pizzo, pathologist and City Council member, led the charge to ban smoking in restaurants, bars, and other public places. He met formidable opposition but prevailed. We need another civic leader with the intelligence and determination of Dr. Pizzo to take up the battle against obesity. A sugar habit is as bad as a smoking habit, and it affects more children.

I'm for any politician who'll take up the challenge.

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