# Should Sugary Drinks Be Taxed Like Cigarettes? Calif. City Considering Idea

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**TRANSCRIPT**

* [**http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health-jan-june12-sodatax\_06-07/**](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health-jan-june12-sodatax_06-07/)

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Now: the campaign against sodas and sugary drinks in the name of public health, the most prominent example of late, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed banning the sale of sweetened drinks larger than 16 ounces at many venues. And, today, health officials and researchers from around the country are meeting here in Washington, D.C., to compare strategies.

One city in California may be poised to go farther than anyone has so far, with a new tax.

NewsHour correspondent Spencer Michels reports.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** At the family market in the working-class town of Richmond, Calif., near San Francisco, owner Mohammed Elzofri is deeply concerned about a new City Council-backed measure which would place a penny-per-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages.

The controversial plan designed to cut consumption of sugar goes before voters in November. Elzofri says about 80 percent of his customers buy some kind of sugary drink and the tax, he says, would add about 68 cents to a popular two-liter drink.

**MOHAMMED ELZOFRI,** store owner: This will just hurt the poor people and hurt these business owners like myself. People that want to drink sodas, they drink. Palm Springs, and Beverly Hills, they all drink sodas. I mean, it’s not a matter of just Richmond that got that. I mean, everybody everywhere is going to you know, gain some weight.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** In fact, the rising rates of diabetes and other weight-related illnesses are at the heart of the debate now raging in Richmond over the proposed tax.

**DR. JEFF RITTERMAN,** Richmond, Calif., city council: We have a big problem with childhood obesity in Richmond, as you probably know. And it’s a health disparity issue for us. Fully a third of our Latino fifth- and seventh-graders and a third of our African-American fifth- and seventh-graders are obese.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** City Councilman Jeff Ritterman, a cardiologist, proposed the tax, which would be the first of its kind in the country. He wants people to reduce their consumption of sodas, what he calls the biggest culprit of the obesity epidemic.

**DR. JEFF RITTERMAN:** If you look at where most of our added sugar is coming, it’s coming from the sugar-sweetened beverages. And they’re different from solid foods. Solid foods produce satiety. You get full. You get full when you eat a piece of cake. You don’t get full when you drink the soda, even though they have the same amount of calories.

It’s actually a poison for you, because your liver can’t handle that huge amount of fructose.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** Ritterman says money from the tax, which exempts diet drinks and fruit juices, would raise an estimated $3 million for local sports fields, diabetes treatment for low-income children, and school-based nutrition classes.

That’s what Richmond needs, says Doria Robinson, a third-generation Richmond resident who runs a program that supports school and community gardens.

**DORIA ROBINSON,** community activist: Richmond isn’t so much a food desert. It’s actually a cornucopia of junk food. It basically translates into pretty much everyone knowing somebody with diabetes, whether they’re a child or an adult, and really struggling with it.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** The tax, she says, could break the addiction to soda so common in Richmond.

**DORIA ROBINSON:** At least half the kids start their day with a Coke and a pack of hot fries. Like, that’s breakfast, and then throughout the day drinking soda like it’s water. Those empty calories have an enormous cumulative effect on our society. We are paying the price in the medical bills and all of the kind of health outcomes in the community.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** Richmond is the latest in a recent string of cities and states considering special taxes on sugary beverages. So far, all have been defeated.

City Councilman Corky Booze, a former auto racer, took us for a drive around his community to show why he opposes the tax.

**CORKY BOOZE,** **Richmond,** Calif., city council: Richmond is a real diverse city. I would say it’s a working, low, economically suppressed community. Most of the people don’t have cars. Kids can’t get out of here. The kids are basically stuck purchasing from this corner store. And the tax is definitely going to affect them.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** Booze says some residents will shop elsewhere to avoid the tax, but poor people won’t be able to.

**CORKY BOOZE:** It’s unfair to people who basically don’t have the means of getting out of their neighborhood store to go into the neighboring communities to be able to avoid that tax.

If we were going to spend our time worrying about something within the city of Richmond that we can fix, we should be working on our streets and we should be working on our job situation.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** And Booze says he doesn’t think the government should be in the business of dictating what people should drink or eat.

**CORKY BOOZE:** I think that when we get into the point of being a dictator to people, I think it’s wrong. People are heavy for all kinds of reasons. It could be health. It could be the style of food that they eat at home. I just don’t think the sodas are going to change that.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** That’s also the position of the American Beverage Association, the industry trade group representing companies like Coke, Pepsi, Red Bull, and Gatorade. It has lobbied hard against similar efforts around the country.

An affiliate group, Americans Against Food Taxes, ran this TV spot during the Super Bowl last year.

**WOMAN:** They want to put new taxes on a lot of groceries I buy, like soft drinks, juice drinks, sports drinks, even flavored waters. Give me a break. I can decide what to buy without government help.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** In a statement provided to the NewsHour, the Beverage Association called the proposed Richmond tax regressive, and added: “It disproportionately hurts the most those who can least afford it. People don’t support soda taxes, don’t believe they will reduce obesity, and don’t trust these taxes will go to pay for childhood obesity programs. They see these new taxes for what they are, a money grab to help pay for more government.”

But for many in the medical community, sugary beverages are a health issue.

Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, an internist at the University of California, San Francisco, co-authored a recent study which found a nationwide penny-per-ounce soda tax would reduce consumption by 15 percent and would, over a 10-year period, prevent several million diabetes cases and nearly 100,000 heart disease cases, as well as saving $17 billion in medical costs.

Dr. Bibbins-Domingo says similar taxes on cigarettes have had a dramatic effect on public health.

**DR. KIRSTEN BIBBINS-DOMINGO,** University of California, San Francisco: It was a few decades ago when we had high rates of tobacco and we had high rates of tobacco-related illnesses. Those measures really turned the tide and really led to lower rates of tobacco across the country.

I think the same has the potential to happen in this case. Richmond in isolation is unlikely to achieve a big effect, and Richmond has taken bold measures to really be at the forefront of this. But many other — many other communities are talking about this very issue.

**SPENCER MICHELS:** The campaign to oppose Richmond’s soda tax is already under way. A local group with encouragement from the American Beverage Association and the local Teamsters union is going door to door to fight the tax.

For his part, Councilman Ritterman says he’d prefer to have a national or even a state tax passed. But, for now, he’s trying to encourage Bay Area governments, including Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco, to join him in the fight against sugary beverages.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** In Europe, the French are already paying higher taxes on Cokes and Pepsis, and the Danes are paying a tax on butter.