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NEWS >>

OPINION: CITY SODA TAX HURTS WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE

By John T. Coli and Rob Karr

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Over the past few years, empowering children and families to make informed choices about their health has rightfully become a hot topic. We believe that educating Americans about maintaining a balanced lifestyle is critical to our nation's wellbeing.

Unfortunately, some Aldermen are attempting to address this vital issue in the wrong way — by proposing regulations and higher taxes that would do little to promote such informed choices. Instead, these burdensome policies would strike a huge blow to employment and local businesses in an already volatile job market.

The Chicago City Council is discussing a potential tax increase on sugar-sweetened beverages, like sports drinks, juice drinks, teas and pop. These products are already taxed multiple times, and taxing them yet again would do nothing to improve Chicagoans' health. But it would be devastating to thousands of working-class employees and businesses throughout the City of Chicago.

There are 1,400 union employees in Chicago whose livelihoods depend, in part, on the non-alcoholic beverage industry. Additionally, there are nearly 40,000 small business owners and their hardworking employees who could be negatively impacted should such a tax be implemented.

We've tried this before. Chicago increased taxes on these beverages in 1991, and yet obesity rates continued to rise. In fact, a study from George Mason University concluded that such a tax would not have a noticeable effect on an average person's Body Mass Index. The only marked effects of these taxes have been an exodus of jobs, small businesses and revenue out of the city.

When it comes to helping make people healthier, there is no silver bullet. Obesity is far too complex. But we have repeatedly been shown that the key to maintaining a healthy weight is by balancing the calories we consume with those we expend through physical activity and exercise.

The beverage industry is leading many great community partnerships to increase education and awareness about how families can make the choices that are right for them. Just last year the industry announced its Balance Calories Initiative, which is the single-largest voluntary effort by an industry to help fight obesity.

This initiative will provide consumers with more choices, smaller portions and fewer calories. The goal of this effort is to reduce the beverage calories consumed per person nationally by 20 percent by 2025. This is a significant effort, and is one that will actually have a real impact on wellness.

But, it's important to keep the calories from sugar-sweetened beverages — including soft drinks, juice drinks, flavored waters and other beverages — in perspective. They make up only 6 percent of calories in the average American's



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diet. That means that more than 90 percent of the calories we consume come from other foods. Arbitrarily placing a massive new tax on such a small piece of our diets would be narrow-minded and ineffective.

We all understand the need and critical importance of promoting measures that help children and families make smart, informed choices. But, rather than trying to do so by burdening struggling businesses and working-class employees with taxes that do little to address the issue, we should focus on educating Americans on how to lead a balanced lifestyle and developing partnerships that will have a meaningful and lasting impact.

John T. Coli is the President of Teamsters Joint Council 25. Rob Karr is President of the Illinois Retail Merchants Association.