Want a healthier state?
Save the gov’s tax on sugar soda

Last week, Gov. Paterson said his soda tax — which would put an 18% tax on soda and other sugary drinks containing less than 70% fruit juice — was in danger of officially going flat. He should find a way to rescue the idea, and quick. The tax is one of the very smartest ways to fight the obesity epidemic confronting the state and country. Here is why. Americans now consume 200 to 300 more calories each day than we did 30 years ago — and a great deal of these extra calories come from sugar-sweetened drinks. A fast-food burger, for all its shortcomings, does have some nutritional value. A 20-ounce soda provides none. And sugar-sweetened beverages now supply 10% to 15% of total daily calories, both in children and adults.

It gets worse. Rigorous scientific studies have shown that consumption of sugared beverages is associated with poor diet, increased rates of obesity and an increased risk of diabetes. In studies where the same people are followed over time, and other studies where people are assigned randomly to reduce sugared beverage consumption, diets improve and subjects lose weight.

Obesity rates in New York State are staggering — 58% of adults are overweight or obese, and the current prevalence of diabetes represents a 50% increase since 1993. When a harmful product is legal, cheap and readily available, a modest tax is the single best way to change behavior.

Yes, we’ve all heard the complaints from the soft drink industry. I’ve been an advocate for soda taxes for 15 years — and have heard the special interests cry foul at every turn. Soft drink companies bombarded Maine with money and consultants to successfully overturn a smaller tax there last year.

In fact, in jurisdictions around the country, this debate has unfolded with neatly scripted predictability. In scene one, the industry claims it’s just standing up for hardworking taxpayers. To counteract the credible scientific evidence linking sugared sodas to obesity, the industry pays a stable of scientists to write papers saying the evidence is weak, just as the tobacco industry paid scientists who claimed for years that smoking does not cause lung cancer and nicotine is not addictive.

In scene two, it’s all about philosophy. The industry says government has no business meddling in private behavior, including what people eat or drink. But the truth is, public policy is already shaping what we eat.

Government has allowed sugared beverages to be promoted in schools; government has failed to restrict the marketing of unhealthful foods to children, and government subsidizes corn, making it very inexpensive to sweeten beverages with high fructose corn syrup. The industry has not complained about this government involvement.

The closing scene attempts to undermine confidence in the tax, either by creating a straw man — “the tax will not solve the obesity problem” — or simply asserting it will not work.

We cannot let the naysayers and industry advocates win. Not this time.

This tax would be a smashing success in so many ways. It would reduce the consumption of sugared beverages, now an average of 41 gallons per year per person. Economic studies predict that an 18% tax would cut consumption by 14%, a whopping public health effect. To produce a drop like this through public education campaigns would cost hundreds of millions of dollars and decades of precious time. Instead of costing money, this tax would generate it — at least $400 million per year.

In fact, an even better idea would be a penny-per-ounce excise tax on sodas. Sales taxes like the one Paterson proposes have one negative side effect. They encourage people to seek bulk discounts. A per-ounce tax would generate the same revenue while discouraging bulk buying, too.

But that’s not what Paterson’s opponents want. They’re dead set against any attempt to make sugared soda — a significant dietary threat to New Yorkers’ health — a little pricier. That is unacceptable. It’s time for New York to stand up for a bold reform that will help future generations make healthier choices.

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By Kelly Brownell

The industry’s complaints are bunk

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