

African American Community Roundtable

P. O. Box 1236
Columbia, MD 21044

July 21, 2014

Dear Mr. Chairman and Council Members:

The African American Community Roundtable is a coalition of 25 civic organizations, faith communities, fraternities, sororities, and government agencies that advocates for a better quality of life for African American residents living in Howard County.

It cannot be denied that obesity and its associated diseases like coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers are becoming a serious public health problem, both nationally and here in Howard County. In 2012, 56% of Howard County adult residents and 25% of children reported being overweight or obese. Type 2 diabetes is becoming more and more common among children and teens, particularly those who are low income or minority. While nearly 1 in 3 children in the general population is likely to develop diabetes in their lifetime, 1 in 2 African American children are likely to contract this chronic health issue. The disproportionate targeting of communities of color by companies marketing sugary drinks and unhealthy foods is one factor in the perpetuation of health disparities in the United States.

We, the Roundtable are writing in solidarity to ask that you vote against CB 37-2014 as a demonstration of the county's commitment to combatting these worrisome trends and improving health outcomes for its citizens of every demographic. The county executive's nutrition standards are a crucial step in developing a county-wide culture of health that supports healthy eating and makes healthy foods and beverages readily available for all. Critics of these guidelines have argued that they restrict choice; however, many of the more vulnerable members of our community currently lack freedom of choice because of issues of cost and availability.

Considering that Howard County Recreation and Parks programs serve about 50,000 children each year and countless other citizens receive food and beverages at county events and on government property, you are in an important and influential position. Although the county can't control what products are stocked on supermarket shelves or how companies spend their millions of dollars in marketing, by ensuring that healthier options are provided at county parks, libraries, and everywhere that people work, play, learn, and pray, the county can both model healthy behavior and expose all of its citizens to the kinds of foods and beverages that will keep them healthier for longer.

A failure to impose any kind of nutrition standards in the face of the extensive body of evidence condemning sweetened beverages would be a failure to meet the government's responsibility of actively making Howard County a safer and healthier place to live. Howard County has consistently been a national leader in addressing the most important health concerns of the time. This, now, is not the time for it to roll back the tremendous progress that has been made in promoting better health outcomes for all.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.