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# New Howard bill would set nutritional standards, with more exceptions

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**N**ew healthy food and drink standards could be coming soon to Howard County's vending machines.

Four months after County Executive Allan Kittleman **repealed a policy that banned sugary drinks and limited high-calorie snacks for sale on government property**, County Councilman Calvin Ball is introducing legislation that would adopt a similar set of nutritional guidelines aimed at "promoting health and choice."

The move comes in response to growing concerns about obesity in Howard and across the nation. A **2012 health survey** conducted in the county found that more than half of adult residents were overweight or obese. This March, an **advisory report** from Kittleman's transition team recommended "aggressively [addressing] the county's obesity issue."

"This legislation creates an environment in our county buildings for our families and health to thrive," said Nikki Highsmith Vernick, CEO of the Horizon Foundation, a Howard-based nonprofit campaigning for healthier drink options across the county. The group worked with Ball, a Columbia Democrat, on the nutritional standards.

The beverage industry panned the initiative as an attempt to strong-arm change.

"The Horizon Foundation again missed an opportunity by continuing to push for government mandates, bans and restrictions. We know that won't make a difference," said Ellen Valentino, a lobbyist for the Maryland/Delaware/D.C. Beverage Association. "Real solutions are rooted in education and a balanced lifestyle."

Valentino said the industry was doing its part by offering new, healthier products. Several top beverage companies set a goal last year to reduce the number of calories consumed per person across the country by 20 percent in the next decade.

The bill, which was prefiled Thursday morning, offers a bit more wiggle room than former **County Executive Ken Ulman's policy**, which prohibited selling any drinks with more than 40 calories on county property or at county-sponsored events and required at least half of the packaged food sold to contain less than 200 calories.

County festivals and special celebrations -- for example, downtown Columbia's Wine in the Woods and Fourth of July festivities on the lakefront -- would be exempt from the nutritional standards. So would local nonprofits, such as sports booster clubs. **Local vendors had complained last summer that the restrictions could hurt their sales.**

"This legislation does not restrict anyone from consuming legal beverages of choice," Ball said. "It only impacts what we as a government offer on government property because, after all, that's our responsibility."

The bill makes a distinction between county office buildings and "youth-oriented facilities," such as libraries, parks, community and recreation centers.

In office buildings, such as the county's headquarters in Ellicott City, up to 25 percent of vending machine offerings could be "junk." At facilities that frequently cater to young people, however, all of the offerings would have to meet the nutritional standards.

"We will draw a line in the sand where it comes to places where our children are the primary users," Ball said.

The bill would also require healthy options to be displayed on the top shelves of vending machines and priced at least 25 cents less than higher-calorie food and drinks, where those are allowed.

About 20 community members were on hand at a press conference Thursday morning to show their support for the new legislation.

Dr. Richard Safer, medical director of employee health and wellness at Johns Hopkins HealthCare and a Howard County resident, talked about the implementation of similar regulations in his workplace.

"Making these healthy food choices easier will make a difference," he said. "No one should leave work for the day and come home less healthy than when they arrived."

Audra Nixon, a member of the African American Community Roundtable -- a coalition of 27 Howard-based African American organizations that counts 4,000 members -- said the group decided unanimously to back the bill.

"It's a no-brainer to be able to support expanded choices," said Nixon, who helps members of the military adopt healthy eating and exercise regimens as the director of administration for a Walter Reed research program.

The bill moves next to the council, which will hold a public hearing in May and could vote on the nutritional standards as early as June.

If it passes the council, which has a 4-to-1 Democratic majority, it would head to Kittleman's desk to be signed into law.

Kittleman's press secretary, Andy Barth, said Thursday afternoon that the county executive had not yet seen Ball's legislation.

"Allan still believes in personal freedom and personal responsibility," though "he favors healthy choices and eating habits," Barth said.

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