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# Howard debates merits of nutritional guidelines for county concessions

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**P**eople packed the Howard County Council's Ellicott City chambers Monday night to testify on a bill that would create nutritional standards for food and drink sold on county property, in a hearing that was reminiscent of another held almost a year ago.

The debate then, in July 2014, also centered on a bill that addressed food and drink guidelines in Howard, and drew so many people that it ran into the early morning hours, with the last testimony delivered shortly after 1 a.m.

Monday night, the hearing wound down around midnight after about five hours worth of testimony.

Opinions came from doctors, citizen activists, religious leaders, business people and the beverage industry, among others.

The discussion focused on a new proposal from County Councilman Calvin Ball, a Democrat from east Columbia, that would set limits on the high-calorie food and drinks the county sells on its property or at Howard-sponsored events.

The bill's nutritional guidelines are similar to those detailed in an executive order signed by former County Executive Ken Ulman in 2012 and repealed by current County Executive Allan Kittleman in December, but Ball's proposal offers more exceptions -- as well as some additional mandates.

If the legislation is passed in its current form, high-calorie drinks and snacks would no longer be sold at "youth-oriented" facilities, such as libraries, parks and recreation centers. In county office buildings, 75 percent of the vending machine offerings would have to qualify as healthy.

Special events and celebrations sponsored by the county would be exempt from the regulations, as would nonprofit groups, such as youth sports booster clubs.

Health professionals called the bill a positive step in combating the nation's growing obesity rates.

"Let's make no mistake: we are talking about one of the biggest public health crises of our time," said Glenn Schneider, chief program officer for the Horizon Foundation, a Howard County public health nonprofit. "Here, we are talking about county government, what its role is and what it can do."

"One small step is going to make a difference. It's going to provide choices," said Michaeline Fedder, government relations director for the American Heart Association.

More than 100 community members, including a large contingent from the community activist group PATH, or People Acting Together in Howard County, showed up to register their support.

The Rev. Robert Turner, senior pastor at St. John Baptist Church in Columbia, told the council that obesity and

related health problems, including high blood pressure and diabetes, were of particular concern to the African American community.

"What you have before you is a choice," Turner said. "You can continue with the status quo -- the same status quo that has led to the alarming reality that half of all African American children will develop diabetes in their lifetimes -- or you can reject the status quo and say 'yes' to health."

But local business owners said they were concerned the regulations would have a negative impact on profitability.

Leonardo McClarty, president of the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, said members of his group were particularly concerned about provisions in the bill that would require healthy items to be placed at eye level in vending machines and priced 25 cents cheaper than unhealthy items.

"Placing a 25 cent cost differential on goods does not take into account acquisition or marketability," McClarty said. "Let's keep in mind the business person that wants to run a profitable business, employ people and contribute to the Howard County economy."

Scott Meskin, the owner of Black Tie Services -- the company that stocks the county's vending machines -- said his business is already "operating ahead of the curve" and doesn't need county-imposed guidelines. Healthy items in Black Tie's vending machines have a "FitPick" label that lets customers know a product is a healthier choice.

"We understand the [health] concern, thus we have made it a priority to address this issue for many years through a voluntary, industry program," Meskin said. "This bill unnecessarily regulates and restricts consumer options."

Meskin said restricting product offerings could complicate the process of stocking vending machines, which have different slots for different-sized and shaped items. Healthier items are usually more expensive, he added, while vending machines typically try to keep prices below \$2.

Locally, however, changes are already being made to the make-up of vending machines.

Meskin's company this week installed a new vending machine at the county's headquarters offering lower-calorie options such as hummus, baked chips and granola bars. The machine was the result of a contract renegotiated while Ulman's nutritional order was still in effect.

In Columbia, Howard County General Hospital reconfigured its beverage vending machines in September to make higher-calorie drink options 25 cents more expensive, according to Ryan Brown, the hospital's vice president of operations. The machines have a "stoplight" rating system that categorizes items by calorie count -- "red light" drinks are those with 100 calories or more.

"It's our duty to provide an environment where healthy options are the default choice for employees," Brown said of the hospital's decision.

Opponents also criticized what they interpreted as a mandate in the bill to provide free bottled water to anyone at county events.

A Howard County fiscal analysis by Chief Administrative Officer Lonnie Robbins cites the cost of providing bottled water free to everyone at the county's 297 events a year at \$388,000 a year.

Overall, Robbins wrote, he "found this bill to have a significant financial impact on county government." He estimated the bill would cost the county \$628,000 a year in renegotiated contracts, development of surveys to

analyze the program and development of a food and beverage product guide, among other costs.

The bill's advocates noted water is already available for free in fountains on county property.

Ball said he planned to iron out more details in a work session in the next few weeks. The bill could come up for a vote as early as June 1.

Kittleman, meanwhile, does not yet have an official position on the nutritional guidelines, according to press secretary Andy Barth, who said the county executive is waiting to see what the final bill looks like.

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