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Locals React to Anti-Soda Tax Campaign in Richmond

By Andrew Stelzer

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From the get-go, the face of Richmond's proposed tax on sugar sweetened beverages has been city Councilmember Jeff Ritterman. "If we're successful we'll make history," he tells me.

Ritterman is a retired cardiologist who got the council to put the penny-per-ounce tax on next month's ballot. He says improving the health of the local community isn't the only goal.

"Once the sugar-sweetened beverage taxes become ubiquitous — and I'm pretty sure they will, it's just a question of when," he says, "if we are victorious it will happen a lot sooner."

But the health issues behind the tax have taken a back seat to questions about how the city will spend the money the tax would raise.

The main argument from Measure N opponents is that the tax proceeds won't necessarily go to fight obesity. While there is an accompanying measure before voters to direct the money to obesity-fighting efforts, the money raised would go into the city's general fund. Billboards and flyers all over town — paid for by the American Beverage Association, a soft drink lobbying group — drive that "general fund" message home.

Chuck Finney is spokesperson for the Community Coalition Against the Beverage Tax, funded mostly by the soda industry. The group has spent more than \$2 million to defeat Measure N.

"This tax isn't gonna effect the bottom lines of these companies," Finney told me. "But their brands and reputations are on the line in a bigger debate right now in this country."

It's not just the soda companies that have gotten involved. I visited the only movie theatre in Richmond, the Century Theatres, which is owned by Cinemark, a national chain. They've donated to the "No on N" campaign; there are "No on N" signs in the parking lot; posters inside

the theatre; the employees are wearing “No on N” t-shirts; and before each movie, a short ad plays about Measure N.

In the ad, a voiceover intones, “Measure N, the Richmond beverage tax, is unfair. It hits people who can least afford it the hardest, and there’s no guarantee the money will be spent as promised. Millions of new taxes, and not one dime guaranteed for our kids.”

Then viewers hear the sound of screams, followed by the encouragement: “On November 6th, vote ‘no’ on Measure N.”

After watching a movie, I ask if people remember the ad and what they think of measure N.

“I’m not for it. I wouldn’t vote for it,” Karen Koistenen tells me. “I don’t think there are any promises for the kids, and I think that’s important. I think parents have a right to work with the kids on what they eat and drink, not the government.”

Joe Maietto tells me he had heard about Measure N on TV, and remembers the ad from before the movie he has just seen.

“I think it’s ridiculous. We pay enough taxes,” he says. “A lot of things are bad for you, that don’t mean you gotta tax all of ‘em.”

Kenneth Wilkerson, pastor at The House of Prayer Ministries said, “It’s not right for the city to try to charge us and then we don’t know where the money is going.”

When I ask him if it matters to him who paid for the ad, he said no. “Chevron, soda companies, it doesn’t matter. It was informative. I’m going to be voting no.”

Other moviegoers — a dozen altogether — all said they were opposed to Measure N — even though most of them acknowledged the negative health effects of soda.

“Yes on N” supporters, who have only raised about \$50 thousand, have tried to portray the issue as local David versus out-of-state, corporate Goliath. They mention the Beverage Association in the same breath as Chevron — another corporate heavyweight in local elections.

Andres Soto is the Richmond organizer for the social justice group Communities for a Better Environment. “The American Beverage Association appears to be trying to ‘out-Chevron, Chevron,’” he says “when it comes to campaign spending in Richmond.”

Soto believes Richmonders are fed up with seeing their elections flooded with corporate cash. “This is gonna be another lesson that it’s not always gonna work,” Soto says, “especially in an enlightened community like Richmond — which has been not only the subject, but (also) the target of this kind of corporate spending for some time.”

Whether the soda industry's spending has been effective won't be known until the votes are counted. But even if Measure N passes, the industry can't claim its message has not been heard.

<http://blogs.kqed.org/election2012/2012/10/25/locals-react-to-anti-soda-tax-campaign-in-richmond>