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LEGISLATIVE ACTION ALERT

The soda tax is an unfair tax on the poor | Opinion

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By [Guest Editorial](#) Patriot News©

By **W. Curtis Thomas**

Philadelphia's beverage tax has hit our city's poorest communities hardest. The city's 1.5 cents per ounce tax has raised prices on thousands of beverages - from teas to sports drinks to juices, and nutritional beverages.

Yet while middle class shoppers have been able to drive to stores in nearby suburban counties, our lower income residents, many without cars, have been forced to pay more because they can't avoid the tax or due to increased transportation costs of getting to stores outside the city.

The tax is also wreaking havoc on local supermarkets - which are economic engines in low-income communities. Each store provides up to 300 employees with family-sustaining jobs with competitive pay, health benefits and even pensions.

The tax works at cross purposes with legislation Harrisburg passed in 2004, which created a Fresh Food Financing Initiative that provided hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private capital to finance the construction of supermarkets in distressed urban and rural communities known as food deserts.

That program was among the most aggressive attempts in the nation to expand grocery access in low-income communities and resulted in the opening of several supermarkets in and around my district - including a Fresh Grocer near Temple University's campus that was highlighted by former First Lady Michelle Obama. These supermarkets are community anchors that fight blight and expand economic opportunities in some of the country's poorest neighborhoods.

City leaders should build on these successes by continuing to work to expand access to groceries and economic opportunities in low-income communities. The beverage tax does the opposite. It is a regressive tax that undercuts the work of the General Assembly by restricting affordable grocery access, costing jobs and raising prices for consumers.

Constituents living in my North Philadelphia district are some of this tax's hardest-hit victims. That's why I'm calling on Gov. Tom Wolf, city leaders and legislators in Harrisburg to begin an immediate dialogue to come up with other ways of providing the funding for Mayor Jim Kenney's priorities.

Everyone agrees that the mayor set out worthy goals when he pledged to use beverage tax revenues to fund initiatives including a new city-funded pre-K program. We just need to figure out a better way to pay for this important program - it should not be on the backs of our city's poor.

Even Mayor Kenney said that he would be happy to entertain alternatives that provided him the necessary funding when he first proposed the beverage tax three years ago. I take the mayor at his word and hope that he will look past ideology and work with the city's Harrisburg delegation on a solution that provides for relief to working families while preserving additional pre-K options for low-income families in Philadelphia.

Legislation to prohibit local governments from imposing taxes on food, beverages and food containers was introduced earlier this month by a bipartisan group of my colleagues in the state House of Representatives. The proposal is set to clear the House Commerce Committee and will likely be quickly taken up by the full House.

I'm concerned that legislation in Harrisburg that repeals Philadelphia's beverage tax without providing additional funding could threaten the future of the city's pre-K program. I am eager to work with my colleagues to find that replacement funding to keep this important education program whole.

Despite this danger, the bill provides an important opportunity for state and local officials to come together and find a better way to sustainably fund the city's pre-K program and even set a model for the rest of the state.

Harrisburg has the resources to appropriate the necessary money to Philadelphia's pre-K system while eliminating the regressive beverage tax that hurts local businesses and raises prices for working families.

As state lawmakers begin our final push to pass a state budget by the June 30 deadline, it's time to work together with Philadelphia's elected leaders to find a creative solution that ends this destructive tax once and for all while putting Pennsylvania's children on the path to academic success with a strong early childhood education initiative. Philadelphia's working families deserve nothing less.

State Rep. W. Curtis Thomas, a Democrat, represents Philadelphia's 181st House District. He writes from Harrisburg.

