

Junk Food Limit Clears Senate

Rell Says School Snack Bill May Usurp Local Board Control, Hints At Veto

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The state Senate gave final approval Wednesday to ground-breaking legislation restricting the sale of junk food in public schools, but Gov. M. Jodi Rell hinted that she was weighing a veto.

Proponents hailed the measure as the nation's strongest stand against marketing sugary sodas and fatty snacks in schools, but Rell said the bill would usurp a decision that belongs to municipalities.

"I think it should be left to local school boards to make that decision," Rell said. Asked if that was a veto threat, she said, "That's longhand for I'm not sure I like the bill."

Rell spoke during a press conference in which she also objected to the passage of a bill that would equalize the penalties for powder and crack cocaine. The Republican governor also expressed doubts about resolving her budget stalemate with Democratic lawmakers before the session ends June 8.

Intense lobbying by the food and beverage industries, plus conflicting philosophies and personalities in the General Assembly, conspired to turn the school nutrition proposal into an unexpected cause celebre.

The bill's sponsor was the new Senate president pro tem, Donald E. Williams Jr., D-Brooklyn, whose party controls 24 of the 36 seats in the Senate. His predecessor, Lt. Gov. Kevin B. Sullivan, had opposed the bill.

The Senate originally passed the measure April 27 on a 24-11 vote, with 11 of the chamber's 12 Republicans opposed and one Democrat absent. Republicans called the measure paternalistic.

In the House, Republicans mounted a virtual filibuster, complaining that without the backing of the powerful Senate leader, the bill never would have been debated.

Even with Williams' sponsorship, passage in the House was in doubt until the bill was weakened to allow the sale of diet soda and sports drinks, which were originally banned. After an eight-hour debate, the longest of the 2005 session, the amended bill passed 88-55 last week and was sent back to the Senate.

On Wednesday, Senate Republicans spoke for two hours against the bill.

"My goal is to point out that this is not an appropriate role for government," said Sen. John McKinney, R-Fairfield. "It should be left for parents."

But the Senate voted 25-11 for final passage, with every Democrat and one Republican, Sen. Leonard A. Fasano of North Haven, in support.

Rep. Mary Mushinsky, D-Wallingford, who complained that Williams' predecessor blocked similar efforts, embraced Williams after the vote.

"You are a good man. You made the difference," she said.

Williams, flanked by nutrition advocates and other supporters, said he believed that Rell could be convinced that the bill was good public policy. It is supported by the Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the State Dental Association and a coalition of church and community groups.

"Given the fact there is this overwhelming public support, and it makes perfect sense in terms of the health of children, I am confident the governor will take a closer look at this and agree to sign this into law," Williams said.

The bill would mandate at least 20 minutes of recess every day for elementary school students and restrict the sale of soda and snacks.

Schools would be limited to selling water, milk and non-dairy milk drinks, fruit and vegetable juice, and water sweetened only by fruit juice. In high schools, sugar-free soft drinks and some sports drinks could be sold 30 minutes after the last lunch period.

Other snacks would be restricted by the state Department of Education, which already was preparing a list of nutritious snack foods for schools. The legislation would give the list, which would be updated annually, the force of law.

"This puts us at the top of the heap," said Lucy Nolan, the executive director of End Hunger!, which backed passage. "No other state has been able to beat back the snack lobby in high school."

Nolan said the nutrition bill has support among churches and parents in the state's cities. Students from poor families are especially at risk from obesity and diabetes, she said.

California banned junk food in elementary schools, prompting increased sales of healthier lunches in urban districts, she said.

Nolan said she hopes that Rell will be persuaded by such facts. She delivered to Rell's office a letter signed by 123 organizations and individuals, some of whom contacted her after the bill was attacked so vehemently in the House, urging that the governor sign the measure.

Williams said the public response was heartening.

"To me, this just underscores what this bill is about - children's health and getting the junk food out of our schools," Williams said.

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