

Rell Vetoes Junk Food Bill

Says Action Protects Local Control; Senate Leader Says It Hurts Children; Override Unlikely

By MARK PAZNIOKAS
Courant Staff Writer

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Gov. M. Jodi Rell vetoed one of the legislative session's most intensely lobbied bills Tuesday, a measure that would have given Connecticut the nation's broadest restrictions on the sale of sugary sodas and fatty snacks in schools.

"While improving the health and wellness of Connecticut's children is a laudable goal, this bill, in my opinion reaches too far by reducing Connecticut's long and proud tradition of local control of schools," Rell said in her veto message.

Lawmakers are unlikely to override the veto.

The Republican governor's veto was harshly criticized by the bill's Democratic sponsor, Senate President Pro Tem Donald E. Williams Jr. of Brooklyn, who accused Rell of protecting the junk food industry at the expense of children.

"The folks at Coke and Pepsi and the people who create the junk food that helps cause childhood obesity, those folks are celebrating the governor's veto today," Williams said. "And ultimately, the people that the governor hurts are the children."

The bill would have restricted the sale of soda and snacks from kindergarten through high school, and also would have required at least 20 minutes of recess every day for elementary school students.

Pediatricians and dentists had urged the governor to sign the bill, while some school officials complained that the ban would cost them vending-machine revenue.

Soda and snack-food companies spent \$250,000 lobbying against the bill, which they feared would set a national precedent, Williams said.

A half-dozen states have restricted junk food sales in schools, though none as broadly as the Connecticut bill proposed. About two dozen states considered similar legislation in

2005, Williams said.

Coke and Pepsi are represented at the state Capitol by Sullivan & LeShane and Gaffney Bennett, two of the state's top-billing lobbying firms.

Intense lobbying, plus conflicting philosophies and personalities at the Capitol, made the school nutrition proposal one of the year's most controversial issues.

Republicans forced an eight-hour debate in the House. House Minority Leader Robert M. Ward, R-North Branford, said Tuesday that the debate was fueled in part by resentment at Williams for pushing his "pet legislation."

"This was flawed legislation masquerading as a substantive attempt to deal with a serious problem," Ward said in a statement. "Gov. Rell has had a longstanding opposition to unfunded mandates from Hartford that always have unintended consequences, and we applaud her veto."

The bill passed the Senate, 24-11, and the House, 88-55. A veto override requires 24 votes in the Senate and 101 in the House, so Williams said an override attempt is unlikely.

Rell said she was instructing the state Department of Education to publish guidelines that will help schools voluntarily improve school nutrition.

"With these guidelines, support from the State Department of Education and the involvement of parents, local school districts may adopt comprehensive school nutrition policies tailored to the needs of each school district," Rell said.

The department already was working on those guidelines. Under Williams' bill, the department's nutrition rules would have carried the force of law, but Rell said she opposed a state nutrition requirement.

"The State of Connecticut should not be substituting its judgment for that of parents and local boards of education when it comes to a matter as important as the health of children," Rell said.

The governor's message echoed the argument of the soda industry and ignored the refusal of the local school boards to restrict the sale of junk food in vending machines and school cafeterias, said Lucy Nolan of End Hunger Connecticut, which led the lobbying effort for the bill.

"What needs to be done is that the schools need to be told to shape up and get the junk out of their schools. And they need to get kids more exercise," Nolan said. "I am disappointed."

Schools would have been 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 have been sold 30 minutes after the last lunch period.

Non-beverage offerings would have been restricted by an education department list of banned foods, which would have been updated annually.

"Local control is not the way that we regulate issues regarding children's health," Williams said. "When it comes to hazardous products or consumer goods, such as cigarettes, that are harmful to health, we don't regulate those on a town-by-town basis."

A University of Connecticut poll commissioned by End Hunger Connecticut found earlier this year that 70 percent of state residents favor restricting junk food in schools and that 85 percent favor more exercise for students.

"Apparently the governor is simply out of touch, out of touch with the pediatricians, who strongly support this, and out of touch with the parents, who know what's best for their children," Williams said.

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