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Los Angeles Stages a Fast Food Intervention

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Almost three-fourths of the advertising aimed at children is for candy, snacks, sugary cereals or fast food. Portions at restaurants have been steadily growing since the 1970s. During that period, people have been eating at home less and at restaurants more. And the majority of those restaurants are chains.

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“What we’re beginning to see is almost the monopolization of our dietary intake by a handful of corporations,” said David Zinczenko, editor in chief of Men’s Health magazine and the author of several [diet](#) books, including “Eat This, Not That! for Kids!” (Rodale, 2008).

“Add to that the financial reality of feeding ourselves today, where a single grapefruit from a corner fruit stand costs two or more times as much as a few Chicken McNuggets,” he said, “and I think you can begin to put together a case for governmental intervention.”

But not everyone agrees, including Joe R. Hicks, a radio talk show host who was the executive director of Los Angeles’s Human Relations Commission under Mayor Richard Riordan a decade ago. The two now work for a think tank that focuses on race relations.

“The crime in all of this is that people are sitting around meddling into the very minutiae of what people are putting in their mouths,” he said.

He argues that the ban assumes the 500,000 people who live in South Los Angeles are intellectually incapable of deciding what to eat.

“It’s insulting, and you could almost infer a racial insult out of the interference,” he said.

Councilwoman Perry said that halting fast food outlets is no different from other ways cities try to protect a neighborhood’s character, like limiting [liquor](#) stores or heavy industry.

And to say that the moratorium was racially charged or that it implies that poor people can’t decide what to eat for themselves, she said, is a diversion from providing access to better food.

The National Restaurant Association, which opposes the ban, agrees that government has a stake in the size of Americans. Taxpayers increasingly must pay for the health costs associated with poor diets and obesity. But, said John Gay of the association, lawmakers can go too far.

“They can’t control food at home, where most of the [calories](#) are eaten. They can’t control Xbox usage, TV usage and Internet usage,” he said. “So where can they grab a hold of this? I’m afraid that leads them to restaurants.” Requiring calorie counts on menus is another tactic. New York City now requires calorie counts, and other cities have begun to pass similar laws. California is considering a statewide requirement. The National Restaurant Association might propose a national standard, like the one governing

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packaged food, that would require uniform nutritional information to be available on wall posters, tray liners or brochures, but not on the menus themselves.

Health advocates say calories should be posted right next to price, so people can make quick, informed decisions.

“There is not a single public health crisis in the history of mankind that has been solved by handing out brochures,” said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

In South Los Angeles, the burgers continue to fry.

“There is a sentiment here that it is a little anti-American, but people forget government tells businesses where to go all the time,” said Eddie North-Hager, a blogger who runs a community bulletin board focused on his neighborhood, Leimert Park, which is about 90 percent black and within the ban area.

He says there are 10 McDonald’s restaurants within three miles of his home. “It seems like a lot,” he said, “and that’s just McDonald’s.”

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