

# EDITORIAL

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## Slippery Slope: Are Snack Foods The Next Tax Target?

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## Five Shot at L.A. Jewish Center Continued...

### FROM FRONT PAGE

Rabbi Marvin Hier, Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said that older children from the Jewish center were touring the Museum of Tolerance at the time. They were not immediately told of what happened at the center, he said.

"It's ironic that the 20 children were here learning about man's inhumanity to man, when their own day camp became a target of such hatred," Hier said.

"It was fortunate that most of the children were in the playing field behind the building, and not many children were inside the center when the shootings occurred there," Hier added.

At the White House, Vice President Al Gore offered Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan federal assistance in capturing the gunman. He

offered his thoughts and prayers to the victims and their families.

"We're monitoring the situation very closely," Gore said. "There is still a great deal we don't know, except the fact that we've seen a neighborhood and a community shattered by violence."

The North Valley Jewish Community Center, 30 miles northwest of downtown, is in a quiet district of single-family homes in the San Fernando Valley. It provides nursery programs, child care and camp activities. It has a large main building, a smaller houselike structure, a pool and tennis courts.

Parents and relatives in tears rushed to the school.

"I have a granddaughter and don't know how she is or anything," one distraught woman said.

By CATHY EPLEY  
DIRECTOR OF OREGON CSE

Hide your Big Macs, Whoppers, and Milk Duds. These American classics may be the government's next targets in its war against politically incorrect consumer products. The Clinton-Gore administration, their allies in Congress, and state legislators throughout the country are increasingly turning to so-called "sin taxes" as sources of new revenue despite massive federal and state budget surpluses. Although alcohol and tobacco have traditionally been the main targets, chocolate, fast food, and potato chips may be next in the sin tax line.

Every state currently taxes cigarettes, ranging from 2.5 cents per pack in Virginia to a whopping \$1 per pack in tax-crazy Hawaii. Most states also tax spirits, table wine and beer. Beer taxes range from

Wyoming's 2 cents per gallon to, you guessed it, Hawaii's staggering 93 cents per gallon.

But now, defenders of public health are moving to new targets, determined to punish us for enjoying salty or fatty food. If the nutrition-police in Washington and the fifty state capitals have their way, you'll be surviving on a tax-free diet of celery, rice cakes, and grapefruit juice. Today it's tobacco and alcohol, tomorrow it could be snack food. That's right, a special tax on the trip to 7-11.

There are several problems with this approach: first, it's arbitrary. Politicians are constantly looking for new tax victims. Fortunately for them, public health advocates are continually expanding the universe of products and activities that are allegedly bad for you or your children. A trip to the ballpark to see America's pastime may soon expose you to punitive taxes, even

if you avoid the beer. The coke you order contains caffeine, which we're told is bad for us, and the salt on those peanuts is bad for your heart; let's not even think about the nachos or bratwurst.

Second, it's unfair. "Sin taxes" subject one segment of the population to a punitive tax because they are engaging in a behavior politicians paint as culturally taboo. They allow the general public to benefit from expansive government programs, while forcing the funding burden onto a small group of people. And your favorite product could be next.

Third, this is a backdoor way of growing government. Politicians pick these taxes for the precise reason that they target people who dare to engage in conduct deemed inappropriate. It isn't that risky for a politician to advocate a 50 cent per pack cigarette increase, whereas a 1 per cent property or

income tax rate increase would get the charlatan run out of Dodge. By selling these tax hikes as a way to save our children from various evils, "sin tax" proponents appear virtuous, cleverly avoiding the "tax-and-spend" label. Unfortunately, nobody seems to notice that the real purpose of these taxes is to fund the expansion of government; witness that these tax proposals never include dollar-for-dollar decreases in other taxes to counteract the "sin tax" increase.

So the next time you hear that some wonderful government program is going to be funded by a tax that only hits smokers or drinkers, think twice. The self-righteous busybodies in Washington and the state capitals have an insatiable appetite for government spending. And they have no problem with telling you how to run your life, especially if they don't share your appetite for Big Macs.

## Scanner Survey Indicates Room for Improvement

More than 42% of supermarkets and other retail stores surveyed by the Oregon Department of Agriculture failed to meet the recommended 98% pricing accuracy for checkout scanners, according to survey results just released by ODA's Measurement Standards Division. However, that survey also indicates most errors are relatively small and that consumers are actually undercharged more often than overcharged.

"Although our survey was somewhat limited in scope, it does suggest there is room for improvement when it comes to retailers ensuring price accuracy," says ODA director Phil Ward. "Retailers must make certain that the price registered by the scanner is the actual price of the item being sold."

Officials are quick to point out the problem is not with the scanner, but with those individuals responsible for programming the equipment.

"Basically, it is employee oversight," says Erin McNicholas, an ODA inspector who coordinated the scanner survey. "Technology isn't the problem. It's the individual implementing that technology. Most commonly, it is shelf tags that don't get displayed or removed in a timely manner. If a store has tags on display for a sale that has expired, consumers may think they should be getting that item for less than the computer or scanner says, though the scanner is reflecting the actual price."

Still, past surveys show that scanners are much more accurate than the old manual entry systems.

In the latest ODA survey, 195 retail stores—including groceries, department stores, drug and novelty stores, auto and home supply outlets, clothing stores, and gas station mini marts—were randomly selected and inspected. Most establishments were located in the highly populated Willamette Valley. More than 16,000 sale items were checked as inspectors compared the listed price with the price shown on the scanner. Again, 42% of the retail establishments inspected failed to meet the nationally recommended standard of 98% price accuracy. However, only 3.06% of all items checked had pricing errors. Further, 1.81% of all items checked resulted in an undercharge, while 1.25% resulted in an overcharge.

"Basically, there are a number of stores that have pricing accuracy problems in Oregon," says McNicholas. "But the degree of that problem in Oregon stores is probably less than in stores surveyed nationally."

Comparing the ODA survey with national surveys conducted by the Federal Trade Commission in 1996 and 1998, the number of stores failing to meet accuracy standards in Oregon is lower than the 1996 study (55.1%) but higher than the 1998 study (29%). The percentage of inaccurately priced items in Oregon is less than both the '96 and '98 studies (4.82% and 3.35% respectively). Correspondingly, the percentage of both overcharges and undercharges are much less in Oregon.

A breakdown in the types of establishments inspected paints a general picture of who may be more likely to have scanner accuracy problems.

Grocery stores had the lowest percentage of businesses failing to meet

accuracy standards (30.9%) and the lowest percentage of inaccurately priced items (2.39%).

"That's due to the fact that most grocery stores are national chains and have an internal price check system already in place," says McNicholas. "They are used to dealing with the problem and have taken steps to keep pricing accuracy high."

At the other end of the spectrum, gas station mini marts had the highest percentage of businesses failing to meet accuracy standards (70%) as well as the highest percentage of inaccurately priced items (6.56%).

"Before people get too concerned about gas stations or mini marts, let me say that fewer of them use scanner technology," says McNicholas. "So the number of stations surveyed was small by comparison. But clearly, if you are

shopping at a mini mart, you may want to pay attention to what is being rung up at the register."

Clothing stores (reporting only 3.67% inaccurately priced items) had the highest average overcharge, if one occurred, at \$14.62 per item. Department stores had the highest average undercharge amount, if one occurred, at \$7.29 per item.

The best advice for consumers is to pay attention no matter where they shop. "Consumers should take a look at the price that's on the shelf, the tag, or the display because in some cases, that price may not be the same one in the scanner," says George Shefcheck, administrator of ODA's Measurement Standards Division, who admits it's not always practical to check every item that might be purchased.

"This survey leads us to three recommendations," says Shefcheck. "First, Or-

gon should adopt the national standards for inspecting scanners. Second, ODA should develop an industry outreach program to assist retailers that are using scanners in understanding the need to put their pricing information into the scanners in a timely manner. Third, ODA should repeat the price verification study at a later date to see if there is improvement from the results we found this time."

Oregon is one of eleven states without a scanner verification program. The current survey has given a snapshot of the industry that relies on scanners. That's helpful in perhaps getting industry to minimize the problem themselves. But there isn't enough evidence yet to suggest that scanner inaccuracy is so rampant that government needs to impose a new full-time inspection program.

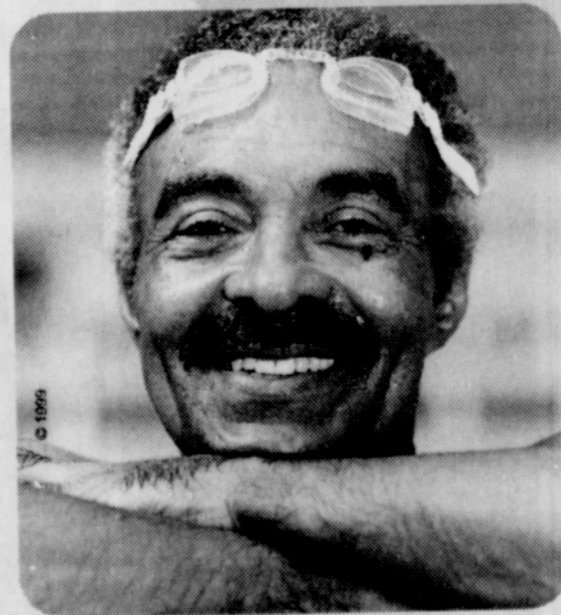
For more information, contact Erin McNicholas at (503) 986-4670.

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