



Diet Conscious Los Angeles Eyes Moratorium on Fast Food Outlets

By Daniel B. Wood

September 14, 2007

The city council is set to vote on a measure next week that would put a two-year moratorium on new outlets in South L.A. amid concern about high obesity rates there.

Pointing south from the corner of Figueroa and Adams in South Central L.A., Tanisha Jackson says when it comes to fast food, her community "has it all."

"If you want it cheap and quick – McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken – we've got it," says the mother of two.

Some city officials see the myriad fast-food outlets as a health problem and are seeking change. "Fast food is primarily the only option for those who live and work here," says City Councilwoman Jan Perry. "It's become a public-health issue that residents be given healthier choices."

She has introduced a two-year moratorium on new fast-food outlets in this part of the city, where small, single-family homes dominate and gangs thrive in a rough urban landscape.

Many national food and health experts say the measure – which is slated for a vote on Sept. 18 – may be the first example of a health-zoning law in the United States. In 2006, New York City health committee chairman Joel Rivera lobbied against uncontrolled growth of fast-food chains, but did not introduce legislation. These observers are applauding the idea as a way to raise awareness about America's obesity epidemic, which hits poorer neighborhoods disproportionately.

"Limiting fast food could be a practical solution if it starts to address the imbalance of too many outlets with food that is not nutritious," says Mark Vallianatos, director of the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

Others say it is a well-meaning but misguided attempt by government to control social behavior, doomed to failure, like prohibition in the 1920s. "You can't regulate the supply side of a behavioral problem and expect results," says Dennis Lombardi, executive vice president of Foodservice Strategies, a consulting firm for the restaurant industry.

Perry says she introduced the legislation because statistics show that residents here have higher incidence of diseases that doctors link to obesity than the rest of the city and the county. "The side effect of a constant diet of fast food is that society pays in the long run in medical costs," she says.

The ordinance would affect about 700,000 residents of South Central, where a recent Los Angeles Times survey found that 46 percent of restaurants are fast-food chains, compared with 12 percent on the west side of Los Angeles.

Perry and her supporters acknowledge that health zoning raises some questions: Will other healthier restaurants move into the region if new fast-food outlets are prohibited? Can the city government aid that transition? Will residents frequent restaurants with healthier options?

"We should always be very cautious about restricting food and dining options for other groups of people," says Barry Glassner, professor of sociology at the University of Southern California and author of "The Gospel of Food: Everything You Think You Know About Food Is Wrong."

He and others cite several benefits fast-food restaurants offer to those living in poorer neighborhoods: good, inexpensive food; a safe environment for kids; and fast preparation, which is particularly appealing to single parents, many of whom work more than one job.

"If a particular community wants to kick out certain kinds of food, that is one thing. For outsiders to do it is patronizing and demeaning," says Dr. Glassner. "Calling all fast food evil is just too simplistic."

Still, others hold more moderate views. Kathleen Hall of the Stress Institute of Atlanta agrees that healthier eating contributes to a longer, more satisfying life. Besides food zoning, efforts must include educating youths about food, countering media influences, and promoting the importance of families eating together in quiet environments, she says.

"We have to teach inner-city kids how to eat or they will find the less healthy foods even at the better restaurants," she says. "Many of these fast-food outlets are actually offering healthier items, but they don't promote them as much as the fattier stuff because they make more money off the big meals."

Burger King, for example, has announced it will roll out apple slices in French-fry cups for kids' meals this fall. Earlier this year, Subway introduced a healthy kids menu, offering raisins or sliced apples instead of chips.

But more needs to be done to encourage healthier eating. Education means giving a higher priority to the health hazards of eating the wrong kinds of foods. In this sense, the proposal in L.A. could help create a more enlightened civic environment about public health.

"Los Angeles's ordinance is helping the community face the fact that there is collective responsibility in this as well as personal responsibility," says Christine Ferguson, director of the Stop Obesity Alliance in Washington.

But Perry and other health officials say they are not trying to play father figure to residents or even eliminate fast food from the city scene.

"The grocery stores in this area are terrible if you want healthy fresh fruits and vegetables," says Lark Galloway-Gilliam, executive director of L.A.-based Community Health Councils, a health policy advocacy group, and also a resident of South Central.

After the Rodney King riots in 1992 devastated these neighborhoods, officials promised more supermarkets and restaurants, she says. But for a variety of reasons, that has not happened.

"Sure, I can get a healthy salad at Whole Foods, if I want to drive 10 to 12 miles and take half an hour. This is not about regulating business; it's about planning communities and giving people healthy choices," Ms. Galloway-Gilliam says.

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