
Arkansas News Bureau

Cokes, Canoes and Politics

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This health kick the reedy governor's on for our state's plump children - it's like anything else, beset by political and economic complication.

Lofty rhetoric aside, Mike Huckabee is in league with the soft drink industry in opposing a regulation proposed by the Child Health Advisory Committee. It would limit the access via vending machines of candy and soda pop at middle schools and high schools.

A few years ago Coca-Cola gave the Huckabees a canoe to use for a year. That is not to suggest the selling out of full-figured kids for good personal floating, a quid pro quo. It is, however, to do more than suggest, but to assert, that this provides a classic example of why a governor shouldn't accept such things. These kinds of innocent coincidences give people a bad suspicion.

For the record, gubernatorial spokesman Rex Nelson says my tying the canoe to the soda pop issue is "a stretch even for conspiracy theorists." Huckabee thought the boat was from tourism officials, he said.

As you surely are aware, Arkansas stands alone among the 50 states in compiling a body mass report on all its schoolchildren. It has now reported to the world that 22 percent of its kids are obese and another 18 percent overweight. People around the country are trying to decide if this means the problem is even worse than they thought or if Arkansas is a unique place that fat-fries itself.

To do something about Arkansas' dire situation, Act 1220 created a Child Health Advisory Committee charged with proposing to the state Education Board regulations on school nutrition and school physical activity.

The committee has now acted. Over the objections of the soft drink industry and in spite of the expressed reservations of the governor's office, the committee has asked the Education Board to require by state regulation that soft drink and candy vending machines at middle schools and high schools remain halfway filled with healthy choices - juice, water and so forth. It also has proposed a statewide regulation by which the machines would be off limits to kids until 30 minutes after the lunch period.

Dennis Farmer, representing the soft drink industry, told the committee that bottlers would not support such statewide regulations. They would go along, he said, only if these matters were left to voluntary compliance by scores of local school district committees on nutrition and physical exercise.

Chris Pyle, the governor's liaison, told the committee the governor did not believe these things should be matters of state mandate.

Local control, it appears, is a matter of situational philosophy. Huckabee didn't think much of it when he was trying to consolidate out of existence the local schools for which he now wants to preserve sole soda pop authority.

The committee impressively stood up to the soft drink lobby and ignored the governor. It has sent the regulations to the Education Board, which will almost assuredly oblige the governor and discard them.

Huckabee made clear to me by e-mail that he opposes restricting soda pop and candy. "We can ban a lot of things, but there are no definitive studies I've seen indicating that banning soft drink machines will impact childhood obesity levels," he wrote.

He added that kids today get about the same daily caloric intake as kids two decades ago. The problem, he said, is that kids today get no exercise.

Actually, the governor's argument runs counter to the law he signed. Act 1220 forbids soft drink and candy vending machines at elementary schools, which is why we're arguing only about a regulation affecting middle schools and high schools.

The state's position seems to be a fifth-grader must not have soft drink from a machine at school, but that a sixth-grader may feel free.

That kind of creative inconsistency is surely more about economic pressure and political alliance than sound children's health.