

The Seattle Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Tax: A Case Study in Policy

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Abstract

Issues: Sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) taxes have been proposed as a means of curbing the tide of obesity and diabetes in the United States. The **Seattle SSB tax** (CB 118965) was proposed in by Mayor Ed Murray in February 2017, and passed in June 2017.

Description: This project will provide a **case study report** on behalf of the advocacy group the Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition (COPC) on the Seattle SSB tax from its initial proposal to its implementation in January 2018.

Lessons Learned: The Seattle SSB tax passed by an almost universal city council vote. Without the efforts of various advocacy groups and stakeholders in Seattle to bring awareness and policy planning to the issue, the successful passage could not have happened.

Recommendations: Future advocacy groups and stakeholders who may be interested in creating local legislation for SSB taxes can utilize this report as a tool for planning their campaigns and prepare for potential challenges.

Objectives

The purpose of the **Seattle Sugar-Sweetened Case Study Report** was to:

- o Limit challenges and pitfalls experienced by future sugary drink tax campaigns
- o Delineate effective campaign strategies for future advocates
- o Provide a tool for reflection for Seattle SSB tax advocates
- o Encourage future SSB tax efforts

Context

- o Soda and other SSB are the **primary** source of sugar in the American diet
- o SSB taxes have been proposed as a possible **solution** to high consumption of added sugars by sugary drinks
- o As of October 2017, **seven cities** have SSB taxes
- o In early 2017, former Mayor Ed Murray proposed the **Seattle SSB Tax**

The Seattle SSB Tax

- o Imposes a **\$0.0175 per fluid ounce** tax on distributors
- o Adds **more than 20%** to the price of most sugary drinks
- o Includes **soda, most juice, sports drinks, and energy drinks**

Tool Development Planning

Tool development began in January 2018.

To develop the tool, an extensive literature review was completed that analyzed past sugary drink tax efforts, both successful and unsuccessful, and provided context for the Seattle SSB campaign. Following the literature review, interviews with various stakeholders and leaders in the **"Yes for Seattle Kids"** campaign provided personal perspectives about the effective (and less effective) methods used to facilitate the passage of the tax.

Tool Development Process

- 1) Dissemination of **current research** regarding similar tax efforts and impacts
- 2) Analysis of **stakeholder and advocate interview** themes and perspectives
- 3) Critical analysis of **campaign methods and political climate**
- 4) Synthesis of findings into **"lessons learned"**



Tax Passage

- o In June 2017, the tax **passed** with a Seattle city council vote of **7-1** (with one non-vote)
- o The tax is expected to generate **\$14 million** annually
 - o Will support programs healthy food assistance programs like Fresh Bucks and education programs like 13th Year
 - o Revenue will also fund research into the impacts of the tax on consumption behaviors and the local economy
- o The **Community Advisory Board** was established
 - o Made of community leaders and researchers, the board directs fund distribution to local programs

Lessons Learned

- o **Know your community.** Each city has a different story and a different personality, and so it is imperative that advocates provide their own community-focused campaigns.
- o **Earmark tax revenue for programs that benefit the communities hardest hit by the health effects of sugary drinks.** Sugary drink taxes are often labeled as "regressive" and earmarking revenue destinations that directly benefit lower socioeconomic groups will help to reduce the stigma against a tax.
- o **Look to community leaders to support the tax and bring them to the front of the conversation.** Many arguments against SSB taxes start with negative impacts felt by underrepresented communities. Develop key alliances and amplify these voices.
- o **Bring in local businesses.** A common argument against sugary drink taxes is that it is anti-business. It is imperative that individual businesses and smaller trade associations be brought into the conversation in support of the tax proposal so that they can be early allies (or at least be neutral players) rather than later antagonists.
- o **Coordinate a unified goal with a multi-sector coalition.** Reach out to community leaders, advocates, business owners, and stakeholders early in the campaign to ensure that they are interested in supporting the tax. Create a unified coalition that develops common goals across groups before campaigning begins.
- o **Craft a unified message for the tax.** Work with advocacy groups and interest groups early to ensure that the message does not become muddled (or at least complicated) by multiple interests.

- o **Find an advocate within city officials.** All legislation needs official support. Find a strong advocate within local government to advocate from the inside.
- o **Use resources to promote and preempt, not to react.** Anticipate what the industry will say, and "inoculate" the city against their messaging. This tactic will mean that you do not need to spend resources to make a rebuttal to every negative press or media release.

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