
Seattle Post Intelligencer, Seattle, WA

Seattle School Board Extends Coke Vending Contract

July 18, 2003

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SEATTLE -- Threatened with a lawsuit over vending machines, the city's school board has renewed a contract with Coca-Cola, but with several new conditions.

In a 4-3 split, the panel decided Thursday to grant Coke another five-year contract that continues to allow daylong access to vending machines at high schools but bars use during class hours at middle schools.

The exclusive deal is expected to generate \$345,000 in the next school year for field trips, dances, yearbooks, newspapers, sports and drama programs.

A \$437 million budget for next year, about \$6.2 million less than the current spending plan, was approved Thursday with little discussion.

"We need to continue to find much-needed funds for school activities," said Jan Kumasaka, a board member who voted for the contract.

It requires Coke to reserve three slots in each machine for water and 100 percent fruit juice, and the board has the right to cancel the contract early.

The new conditions fail to meet concerns over obesity, diabetes and other health issues from sugar-laden soft drinks, and a lawsuit may be filed, George Washington University law professor John F. Banzhaf III said by telephone.

Banzhaf, a key backer of lawsuits against the tobacco industry, renewed his offer to assist in any case against the Seattle School District over the vending machine contract.

High school soft drink sales are banned by the nation's two largest school districts, New York and Los Angeles. School systems where they are allowed include Tacoma, Puyallup and Portland, Ore.

Seattle board president Nancy Waldman said she had changed her mind since voting for the Coke deal five years ago although her daughter, a Roosevelt High student, pleaded on behalf of the deal because of the funds it would provide for extracurricular activities.

"I don't like the fact that the schools are providing an unhealthy drink to kids," Waldman said. "Even if we had a milk and a Coke machine, they would choose Coke."