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School Board Cancels Coca-Cola Deal

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DOYLESTOWN, Pa. -- A month after approving a \$ 3.8 million contract with Coca-Cola for the right to sell soft drinks to students, Central Bucks school board members have changed their minds.

The board voted, 5-4, last week to rescind what had been one of the biggest "pour contracts" in the state. Profits from the contract were going to help fund a stadium at Central Bucks East High School.

Opposition to the deal had been fierce, much of it surfacing just before the board voted for approval. Some board members were unaware at the time of the vote that the contract included a clause that allowed Coke to use the district name in its marketing materials. They said they also had not been given a copy of a competing contract proposal from Pepsi-Cola, which included less potential for advertising on campus.

Another problem the board faced was a lawsuit from Pepsi, which claimed it had an existing contract with the district that lasted through 2001. The 10-year Coke contract was scheduled to take effect in the fall. A lawyer for the school district said the board never ratified the contract with Pepsi. But members did vote to approve it and it was signed by a district finance director.

So in a surprise vote late Tuesday, the board decided to fund the stadium with \$ 2.6 million from its budget reserves. That sum represented the value of the Coke deal to the district; the rest of the money would have gone to satisfy standing contracts with other district food vendors.

Board member Elizabeth Yonson, who was absent during the vote last month, said she voted to rescind the contract because the deal was creating a rift between the district's two high schools. Parents and students from Central Bucks West complained

that each student there would be expected to drink three cases of soda a year to meet Coke's quota to help fund a project at another school.

But Yonson and other board members who voted to rescind the Coke deal said they were still open to a soda contract under different terms. There has been some discussion about looking more closely at the offer from Pepsi.

"We're going to look at other proposals," said board member Jacqueline Wolchko, an opponent of the Coke deal. She complained that board members were misinformed about what they were voting on when that deal was approved last month.