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Policies Support Obesity

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Meg Haskell

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Does the government promote obesity? State Rep. Sean Faircloth says, "Yes."

At Friday's initial meeting of the 28-member Commission to Study Public Health, the Bangor Democrat took aim at six public policies he feels have created and sustained the growing epidemic of obesity.

Federal subsidies, according to Faircloth, have supported oil companies and car manufacturers while ignoring the construction of footpaths, bike trails and sidewalks. Manufacturing subsidies promote the production of highly processed foods such as high-fructose corn syrup while growers of fresh produce struggle for financial viability. Low-income people dependent on public assistance programs such as food stamps and the National School Lunch Program are encouraged to consume high-calorie foods.

Faircloth said chronic underfunding of education forces school lunch programs to market soft drinks and snack foods to stay afloat. The government also fails to regulate advertising, allowing unhealthy products to be marketed directly to children.

And, he said, by not requiring popular fast-food restaurants to prominently post the calorie content of menu items, government denies consumers access to vital information they need to make healthful decisions.

"Everyone says obesity is a matter of personal responsibility," Faircloth told the commission members assembled at the State House. "But how can people take personal responsibility if they don't have the information?"

Faircloth sponsored a handful of fat-busting bills in the last legislative session, including a measure to rid school vending machines of sodas and high-calorie snacks and

one that would require chain restaurants to post the calories of the items on their menus. The bills never made it out of the committee approval process, but have drawn national attention nonetheless.

While the bills were defeated, lawmakers did agree to create a commission to study the issue. The group is charged with studying obesity and devising ways to combat it through public policy and legislation. Members represent a range of interests, including health care, the soft-drink industry, physical education, dentistry, school administration, health insurance, the dairy industry and food-service workers. Four lawmakers sit on the committee.

Among issues the group will consider are the adoption of a revised nutrition pyramid, strategies for increasing the physical activity of adults and schoolchildren, and ways to promote workplace health. Results will be reported in one year, with proposals submitted to the Legislature for debate. The next meeting will be Jan. 23.

Maine has the highest rate of overweight people and obesity in New England, with about two-thirds of all adults weighing more than they should. Of children entering kindergarten, third grade and fifth grade last year, 36 percent were overweight or obese. About 25 percent of high school students are overweight or obese.

Rates in Maine have increased by 75 percent in the last 12 years, following the national trend. Public health officials cite a combination of factors, including more sedentary lifestyles, more "screen time" in front of televisions and computers, an increase in the number of times per week that people eat meals outside the home, the "supersize" phenomenon in restaurant portions and a culture that is more likely to accept its increased girth.

The complications of obesity, which include diabetes, heart disease, gall bladder disease, cancer, physical disability and mental-health problems, cost the Maine health-care system about a half billion dollars a year, according to the state Bureau of Health.

"It took 40 years of government policy to get us where we are today," Faircloth said Friday. "No one step is going to change it. The important thing is to look at possible solutions, and get all the proposals out on the floor to be debated."