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FREEDOM HAWK: Pizza tax would violate citizens' free will

By Patrick Walsh, Staff Columnist

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Undoubtedly, there is a weight issue in America. But the government has no right to ignore our liberties and act like neo-monarchs in an attempt to control every detail of our lives.

In an effort to curb health care costs, the American Medical Association has urged governments at the local, state and national levels to institute a pizza tax to deter people from consuming pizza. This solution was derived after the association conducted a study found if pizza and soda were smacked with an 18 percent tax, it would reduce Americans' intake of calories and slash health care costs by \$147 billion per year, according to www.dailyfinance.com.

Pizza was focused on because, like soda, its real price — versus inflation, at least through 2006 — decreased with time, but prices for seemingly healthier foods such as whole milk increased throughout the 20-year period in the study.

Increasing the price of pizza to curb health care costs is absurd. If people are overweight, it's up to the individual or family to decide whether to get into shape or to live unhealthily. The more government continues to tax our liberties, the more it will feel justified to manipulate our lives. With the government running the health care system, it could — and probably will — use its bully pulpit to try and influence what we can and can't eat or smoke, for example. I have philosophical grievances associated with the control this study implies, reminiscent of bringing "Big Brother" down on the American people because they can't seem to live healthy lives on their own. But there are many objections I have with the study itself.

Comparatively, pizza is not that bad for you, amounting about 300 calories a slice for cheese-only, according to the Web site www.calorieking.com, and whole milk has 147 calories for an

8-ounce serving. When considering the amount of calories packed into a salad, depending on the dressing, or the McDonald's Quarter Pounder with 410 calories, there are worse foods out there, so I don't see the the AMA decided to wage a war on pizza.

Theoretically the study is right, if you increase the price of something, in general, the consumption will decrease. But not all food experts agree. Keri Gans, a registered dietitian in New York and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, told www.dailyfinance.com, "I don't think you can single out one food or two foods as a cause of obesity. People love their high-calorie coffee drinks that cost a fortune."

The pizza industry, including both huge chains and local pizzerias, accounts for a \$50 billion business in the U.S. Volatile commodity prices and cash-strapped customers have damaged the industry throughout the last couple of years. Some families find it is more practical to eat fast-food than at a restaurant. "An 18 percent tax increase on pizza and soda would be devastating to the industry, which counts on soda sales to boost its profits," Jennifer Litz, editor of an industry Web site called Pizza Marketplace, said.

Others representing the pizza industry voiced concern and wonder why they are being scapegoated for the obesity problem in the U.S. Tim McIntyre, vice president for communications at Domino's Pizza Inc. told www.dailyfinance.com, "Pizza is completely customizable — you can make it as healthy or as indulgent as you want." It is all up to the consumer as to how many calories he or she consumes.

Taxing people into better health has gained popularity in America. Soda taxes are already being discussed in New York and Philadelphia. Federal-level taxes are being looked into as well. The American Heart Association and the director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control support soda taxes, according to www.healthandage.com. But such taxes will be proportionally unfair to lower-income citizens, who spend more of their money on fast food. Sallie James, a policy analyst from the Libertarian Cato Institute, lashed out at this government control that may be forced upon people's lives. "It's no one's business what anybody puts in their mouths," James said in an interview with www.dailyfinance.com. "I suspect some lawmakers are attracted to it for a revenue source."

Now that the federal government has taken control of health care, it will have more power to tax food items and other indulgences as it sees fit, in order to deter Americans from consuming them ... all in the name of lowering health care costs. This is exactly what many warned could happen.

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