

City OKs ban on trans fats

Council vote forbids use in food sold in restaurants, delis

By John Fritze

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French fries, pastries and pie crusts still won't be healthy -- but in Baltimore, at least, they will no longer contain trans fats.

Baltimore joined a growing number of cities that have banished trans fats from prepared food after the City Council approved a ban tonight that received little opposition from either residents or restaurateurs.

The unanimous vote to ban trans fats -- which are common in margarine, shortening and deep-fried foods -- was cheered by supporters who say the oils can clog arteries, cause heart disease and expand waistlines.

"Our children are obese because of the kinds of unhealthy foods that they're eating," said City Councilwoman Agnes Welch, who sponsored the bill as part of her effort to reduce childhood obesity. "This is a step forward."

Philadelphia, New York City, Montgomery County and, as of last week, Boston all have approved similar bans. In Baltimore, any prepared food containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oil would be prohibited by the legislation.

Mayor Sheila Dixon, who keeps an aggressive workout schedule, is expected to sign the ban. It would take effect in the fall of 2009.

"As communities like New York and Montgomery County have shown, there are plenty of healthier alternatives to trans fats," Dixon said in a statement. "The ban on trans fats will make it that much easier for Baltimoreans to make better food choices and make this a healthier city."

Debate over the bill -- which came just months after a hotly contested smoking ban was approved -- was unpredictably smooth. The bill sailed through the council in three months. Only a half-dozen residents showed up to speak at a March 4 hearing on the legislation.

There was no discussion of the bill at tonight's council meeting -- unusual for potentially controversial bills.

Some have suggested that opposition to the trans fat bill might have been light because many restaurants -- including fast-food chains -- already have moved away from many of the ingredients that contain trans fats.

"We want to get rid of them, but one of the challenges has been to get rid of them in a time frame that allows [restaurants] to find suitable alternatives," said Melvin R.

Thompson, vice president of the Restaurant Association of Maryland. He said the council's decision to delay implementation of the ban made it easier for restaurants to comply.

"Now that the council has worked with the industry to give us a little more time we do not oppose the bill," Thompson said.

Restaurant owners in Philadelphia and Montgomery County, where similar bans have taken effect, said making the switch has presented few challenges or opposition.

Bruce Mancuso, who co-owns the Crisfield Seafood Restaurant on Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring, said he switched to a regular, non-hydrogenated frying oil and that it did not affect his bottom line or his customer base.

"It hasn't affected us too much," Mancuso said. "We've changed our frying grease -- that's pretty much all it entailed."

In Philadelphia, restaurants are prohibited from frying foods in trans fat and serving trans fat spreads. Later this year, the ban will be expanded to other types of food.

George Evangelou, who owns the South Street Diner in Philadelphia, said he hasn't heard a word from his customers since making the switch in the fryer.

"I think it's a good deal," Evangelou said. "It's healthier." Philadelphia enacted its ban in 2007, but the council amended the law in October to exempt neighborhood bakeries -- some of which had been relying on generations-old recipes that included trans fats, according to news reports there.

Trans fats, often found in oils used for fast food and packaged snacks, can clog arteries and lead to heart disease. Some studies blame the fats for as many as 50,000 fatal heart attacks a year. The American Heart Association recommends that people limit trans fats to less than 1 percent of their daily calories.

The ban applies to any establishment where food is prepared for sale, including restaurants, deli counters and fast-food chains. It does not apply to packaged food for sale in grocery stores or vending machines.

Health experts have said that banning trans fats is a fine idea but that it is equally important to take note of what they are replaced with. If restaurants trade trans fats for those high in saturated fat, then the health benefit may be negligible.

Del. James W. Hubbard, a Prince George's County Democrat, has pushed for a statewide ban on trans fats in the past and, this year, sponsored a bill that would create a task force to study the issue. Hubbard said he hoped Baltimore's ban would prompt lawmakers to action.

After several unsuccessful attempts, the General Assembly approved a statewide smoking ban last year in the wake of the Baltimore City Council's vote to adopt a citywide prohibition. But while other states had approved smoking bans, no other legislature in the country has supported a statewide trans fat ban.

"The whole goal of this bill is to push a prohibition on trans fats at the state level," Hubbard said. "The general public likes to be informed about what they're eating, and it has not had implications for restaurants."

"It's the right thing to do," said City Councilman William H. Cole IV. "Anything we can do to have healthier options for Baltimore residents."

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