Mayor Bloomberg: Group ‘Sold Its Soul’ over Drinks Issue

NEW YORK (AP) — Two minority groups' effort to block the city's size limit on sugary drinks is "an outright disgrace," New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said Friday.

The Hispanic Federation "sold its soul" and the local chapter of the NAACP turned its back on the people it represents by joining a court fight against the first-of-its-kind restriction, the mayor said on his weekly WOR Radio show.

The action by the NAACP's New York state branch and the network of Hispanic groups on Wednesday ignited questions about the groups' ties to the beverage industry.

"How can the NAACP chapter look at themselves in the mirror knowing they are deliberately hurting the life expectancy and quality of life for the people they're supposed to serve?" Bloomberg asked Friday.

He said children who are the most obese and where the sugar ban would do the most good tend to be in the city's minority neighborhoods.

The two groups joined a lawsuit filed by the American Beverage Association and others that seeks to block the restriction, set to take effect March 12. With no immediate ruling Wednesday, opponents said they planned to ask state Supreme Court Justice Milton Tingling to put the ban on hold until the case is decided.

The city Health Department's chief lawyer, Thomas Merrill, said it would oppose such a move.

The NAACP and the Hispanic Federation say their concern is that minority-owned delis and corner stores will end up at a disadvantage compared with grocery chains.

"If Mayor Bloomberg is serious about taking this issue on, he cannot single out bodegas who will struggle to adapt and compete with corporate franchises," Hazel Dukes, president of the NAACP New York state branch, said in a statement Friday. The NAACP chapter "supports an inclusive agenda to take on the epidemic of childhood obesity, including limiting the amount of unhealthy food, increasing opportunities for physical activity and investing in opportunities that promote accessible land spaces to improve healthy living."

Her statement was not a direct response to the mayor's radio comments.

The Hispanic Federation, an organization of 100 Northeastern groups, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Beverage makers, restaurateurs, minority advocates and other critics told a judge the upcoming 16-ounce limit was a finger-wagging incursion on consumer choice, rife with inconsistencies that would cost a hot dog vendor business while still allowing New Yorkers to buy belly-buster sodas at the chain convenience store next to him. Opponents' lawyers called it "ham-handed," ''grossly unfair" and just "plain silly."

The restriction is the latest in a line of Bloomberg administration healthy-eating initiatives. It bars restaurants and many other eateries from selling high-sugar drinks in cups or containers bigger than 16 ounces. Violations could bring $200 fines; the city doesn't plan to start seeking those until June.

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