L.A. Says 'No Fries With That'

Hoping to improve people’s diets, Los Angeles has banned new fast-food outlets in part of the city. Should what we eat be the government’s business?

Driving along Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, it’s not hard to find a place to grab a bite. At some intersections, there’s a fast-food joint on every corner. And if the restaurant chains had their way, city officials say, that’s what most streets would look like in some parts of town.

That's why Los Angeles is effectively banning new fast-food restaurants in South Los Angeles, a huge section of the city that has significantly higher rates of poverty and obesity than other areas of the city.

The ban, which the City Council passed unanimously in December, is meant to encourage healthier dining options. Supporters envision more sit-down restaurants, produce-filled grocery stores, and takeout meals that center on salad rather than fries.

"If people don’t have better choices or don’t have the time or knowledge or curiosity, they are going to take what’s there," says Jan Perry, a city councilwoman who pushed for the regulations. "To say that these restaurants are not part of the problem would be foolish."

Even in a nation where a third of schoolchildren are overweight or obese, the L.A. fast-food ban raises questions about when eating a particular kind of food stops being a personal choice and becomes a public-health concern. In short, is this the government's business?
Nanny State
The ban is part of a broader move by some local and state governments to use the law to fight obesity and the health problems it causes. Many states have banned soda and candy from schools. California and New York City have prohibited restaurants from using trans-fats, which are chemically altered fats that are particularly unhealthy. New York City also passed a law requiring calorie counts to be posted on chain-restaurant menus, right next to the prices.

Critics of these measures say they go beyond the proper role of government and are emblematic of a trend toward what they call the "nanny state."

"I think it's pretty ridiculous," says Joe Hicks, a Los Angeles community advocate. He thinks the fast-food ban raises serious questions about the role of government. "I don't want my government wagging their finger and trying to micromanage my personal life, telling me that cheeseburgers and French fries aren't healthy—as if I didn't know that!"

There's also the question of whether the ban will work: Just because the city bans new fast-food places doesn't mean that every storefront will suddenly be filled with salad bars and other healthier options.

The regulations are not an absolute ban; existing fast-food places can remain open, and exceptions are made for those opening inside shopping centers. Many mom-and-pop businesses or casual restaurants that serve equally unhealthy food can also get permits to open; it's the fast-food chains that are most affected.

The City Council first enacted a one-year moratorium in 2008. Since then, no new stand-alone fast-food establishments have opened in the area. Instead, Perry says, the area got its first new supermarket in a decade.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, an advocacy group in Washington that has fought against fast-food chains, is pushing for other cities, like Philadelphia and Detroit, to enact similar limits. But so far, there's been little support for the idea.

By the L.A. council's estimate, there are nearly 1,000 fast-food places in the 30 or so square miles of South Los Angeles, a largely black and Hispanic area. Some 30 percent of the area's 750,000 residents are obese, double the rate in wealthier parts of the city, according to the county's Department of Health.

But is a fast-food ban the answer? A study released in 2009 by the RAND Corporation, a research group based in Santa Monica, California, found that the moratorium was unlikely to change the rate of obesity or diabetes in the area. The study said that rather than focus on fast food, policymakers should look at junk food snacks from gas stations and convenience stores.
People get a lot more of their discretionary and unnecessary food from there than from a fast-food restaurant," says Roland Sturm, a senior economist at RAND. "A lot of this is driven by sound bites overlooking what is actually going to have an impact. People talk about this area being a food desert, but it is more like a swamp—you are literally drowning in food, but none of it is really a good option."

A trip along Crenshaw Boulevard illustrates how difficult it might be to change people's eating habits. At a Carl's Jr., a popular burger chain, a group of teens on their way home from school gobble up Western Bacon Cheeseburgers—one boy calls it his "before-dinner snack."

Cynthia Williams and her two young children sit at another table nearby, picking at their fried chicken stars. "This is a fun thing for them and easy for me, so how can I not come at least once a week or something like that?" Williams says.

"When you're out, you are just going to look for the first decent thing around. If there are fewer of them, fine by me, but we're still going to go to the ones we’ve got now."

**Demonstrate Understanding**
1. If you were trying to summarize this article for someone who hadn’t read it, what would you say? Include main ideas and supporting details.
Demonstrate Understanding
2. How are some local and state governments trying to fight obesity? Give two examples from the article.

Develop an Interpretation
3. How do you think information in the article could affect you or people you know right now? Please provide examples from the text to support your answer.
Develop an Interpretation
4. Find at least one statement of fact and one opinion in the article and explain why you think it is a fact or opinion.

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Analyze Text
5. Journalists are supposed to be unbiased. Is this author completely objective or is she trying to promote a particular position? Give examples from the article to support your answer.
Analyze Text

6. The author uses specific literary devices or writing techniques in this article. Find **two** examples and name the technique being used.

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