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Soda-free schools and walking trails

Legislators tackle issues during women's health conference

BY JANET L. METZNER *The Dominion Post*

Veggies should be tax-free and schools should be soda-free.

More walking trails and better access to them are needed throughout the state.

Insurance rates should be lower for people who keep their weight down.

Attendees at the Women's Health Policy Conference made those and other suggestions to legislators Wednesday in an effort to get West Virginia women on the path to better health.

There is a high rate of obesity and weight-related illnesses such as diabetes among West Virginia women, said Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia. "We talked about how to motivate West Virginia women toward wellness."

The roundtable discussion with legislators was the finale to "Exercise your Body, Rights and Mind," the fifth annual, two-day conference held at the Radisson Hotel and Conference Center.

Although the three legislators present did not agree all the suggestions would be successful in the Legislature, Fleischauer said the time spent was worthwhile. "This gives everyone a chance to ask the tough questions," Fleischauer said.

Natalie Tennant, former candidate for Secretary of State, urged legislators to support getting sodas out of schools.

She also suggested that public employees who maintain their weight should get lower insurance rates through the Public Employees Insurance Agency, the agency that insures state employees.

Non-smokers already get lower rates, she said.

The idea of having monthly taxfree days on vegetables and other healthy foods stirred some controversy.

It would be a "tax nightmare for us to do," said Delegate Bobbi Hatfield, D-Kanawha. But Delegate Cindy Frich, R-Monongalia, a proponent of doing away with food tax all together, disagreed.

"It would not be a nightmare if (the tax break was) year-round," she said.

At least one attendee urged Hatfield and others to reconsider the idea.

Walking trails are important, Hatfield said. But city and county governments should be left to decide whether they want trails, or whether they have the money to maintain them. The state should not mandate that they be built.

Frich said she has supported statewide trail coordination, including hiring a person to be state trail coordinator. That idea, however, did not gain enough support in the Legislature.

Still, trail interests can be worked into land-use planning legislation, she said. And officials at the local level can work to make their communities more walkable.

For example, she said, officials in Morgantown could better enforce the city ordinance that requires anyone who builds a new house to build a sidewalk for it. "We have to enforce what's already on the books."

Fleischauer emphasized the importance of making rural areas more walkable.

In her 10 years in the House of Delegates, Fleischauer said she has been an active supporter of women's issues.

Although she lost her bid for another term during the November general election, "I want to remain active and will run again," she said during the discussion.

Getting legislation passed that will help women specifically is a tough task, Fleischauer said. "It's about finding common ground between health care providers and policymakers."