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Fla. Doctor Fired over "Donuts=Death" Sign

After Posting "America Dies on Dunkin'" Sign Outside Health Department, Doctor Forced to Resign



"Dunkin' Donuts is pleased that the signs have been removed," a spokesman for Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Donuts said in an e-mail. **(AP Graphics Bank)**

(AP) Dr. Jason Newsom railed against burgers, french fries, fried chicken and sweet tea in his campaign to promote better eating in a part of the country known as the Redneck Riviera. He might still be leading the charge if he had only left the doughnuts alone.

A 38-year-old former Army doctor who served in Iraq, Newsom returned home to Panama City a few years ago to run the Bay County Health Department and launched a one-man war on obesity by posting sardonic warnings on an electronic sign outside:

"Sweet Tea = Liquid Sugar."

"Hamburger = Spare Tire."

"French Fries = Thunder Thighs."

He also called out KFC by name to make people think twice about fried chicken.

Then he parodied "America Runs on Dunkin'," the doughnut chain's slogan, with: "America Dies on Dunkin'."

Some power players in the Gulf Coast tourist town decided they had had their fill.

A county commissioner who owns a doughnut shop and two lawyers who own a new Dunkin' Donuts on Panama City Beach turned against him, along with some of his own employees, Newsom says. After the lawyers threatened to sue, his bosses at the Florida Health Department made him remove the anti-fried dough rants and eventually forced him to resign, he says.

"I picked on doughnuts because those things are ubiquitous in this county. Everywhere I went, there were two dozen doughnuts on the back table. At church, there were always doughnuts on the back table at Sunday school. It is social expectation thing," says Newsom, a lean 6-foot, 167-pounder in a county where 39 percent of all adults were overweight in 2007 and one in four was considered obese.

Newsom was hired by the state Health Department to direct the county agency. His \$140,000-a-year salary is paid jointly by the state and the county. His job primarily involves educating the public about health issues - swine flu, AIDS and the like - but he also decided to address the dangers of glazed, sprinkled and jelly-filled treats.

He angered staff members by barring doughnuts from department meetings and announcing he would throw the fat-laden sweets away if he saw them in the break room. He also banned candy bars in the vending machines, putting in peanuts instead.

In May, lawyers Bo Rivard and Michael Duncan, co-owners of a new Dunkin' Donuts, asked Newsom to take down the "America Dies on Dunkin'" message. Newsom already had run other anti-doughnut warnings, including "Doughnuts = Diabetes," and "Dunkin' Donuts = Death."

The businessmen had the backing of County Commissioner Mike Thomas, who owns a diner and a doughnut shop. Thomas called for Newsom's ouster, saying the doctor shouldn't have named businesses on the message board.

"I think he was somewhat of a zealot," Thomas says. "I don't have a problem with him pushing an agenda, it's the way he did it. People borrowed money to go into business and they are being attacked by the government."

A short time after Newsom's meeting with Rivard and Duncan, Newsom says, his bosses at the state Health Department told him that his leadership wasn't wanted and that he could be fired or resign. He chose to resign May 8 but has reapplied for the job.

"I have never been known for my subtlety. I don't have a knack for it. I speak the truth to people and just assume that that my data and purpose are so real and true that everyone will see the value of what I'm doing," says Newsom, who now works at a prison, doing exams of inmates.

Rivard and Duncan did not return numerous calls to their offices.

"Dunkin' Donuts is pleased that the signs have been removed," Andrew Mastrangelo, a spokesman for Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Donuts said in an e-mail.

The Florida Health Department has refused to talk about Newsom since he is considered a job applicant. "We will be happy to talk to you after the position has been filled," department spokeswoman Susan Smith said in an e-mail.

Newsom is hoping to get his job back so that he can resume his campaign against overeating.

"My method was a little provocative and controversial," he says, "but there wasn't a person in Bay County who wasn't talking about health and healthy eating."