



FAT FOODS FROM THE 50

Americans pack on the pounds, and Health.com has come out with a possible reason why. Horrendous food choices. It found one fatty fiasco food from each state. The competition was based on “the grossness factor and shocking combinations,” of each item, Amy O’Connor, Web editor in chief, told USA Today. Some indigestible winners include the famous hot beef sundae from Iowa, a bacon-wrapped meatloaf from Alabama, the high altitude 7-pound breakfast burrito from Colorado, a fried-brain sandwich in Indiana, the New York “garbage plate,” and New Mexico’s infamous frito pie.

FIREFIGHTERS’ FOE

Firefighters often are exposed to asbestos, benzene and diesel fumes, all carcinogens. A recent study in Ohio found that male firefighters are 100 times more likely than their peers to get testicular cancer. This spurred lawmakers in Pennsylvania to pass a bill identifying certain cancers as “work hazards” and making it easier for firefighters to qualify for health insurance even after they retire. It gives these public servants coverage for life if diagnosed with certain cancers within five years after retirement. Thirty-one states have similar laws.

ELECTRIC LOUISIANA

Louisiana spent more than \$1 million to update electronics in both chambers of its Capitol. “We want to maintain a clear ability to communicate with the public,” House Speaker Jim Tucker told the Associated Press. Digital technology, including flat-screen monitors, replaced the old equipment. And new buttons were added for lawmakers to make motions, helping clarify for leaders whether the lawmakers are asking questions or raising points about amendments or bills. “We’ve gotten deep-in-the-ditch confused of where we were in the debate,” Tucker said of the previous equipment.

THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The public is unrealistic in its expectations about what state governments can do and what they can afford, according to state leaders who spoke at NCSL’s Fall Forum last December. Oregon Senator Richard Devlin isn’t convinced the public is ready to accept long-term reductions in services required in the “new economic reality.” Utah Representative Ron Bigelow said there is only a small “window of opportunity” for lawmakers to cut more spending and perhaps even increase taxes before the public outcry begins. “They’re going to say, ‘Why can’t you fix it?’” he told the group.

VOTERS IN VERMONT

Vermonters passed a constitutional amendment in Nov. 2010, to allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections—if they will turn 18 by the general election. Eleven other states have similar provisions: Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia. Seventeen-year-olds in 11 other states (and even lucky 16-year-olds in Hawaii, North Carolina and Rhode Island) can register to vote, but must wait until they are 18 before casting their first vote. According to the Census Bureau, only 58.5 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds are registered to vote, and only 48.5 percent voted in 2008.



DRINK UP

Schools in California have until July to provide free and fresh water at lunchtime. Senator Mark Leno sponsored the bill because “we are battling an epidemic of childhood obesity,” he told National Public Radio. “Water can help children control their weight significantly. But it also has to do with their school performance. We know for a fact that dehydration is associated with impaired cognitive function and that it also can adversely affect alertness, attention and perception, memory and reasoning.” The new law imposes no penalty for not complying and provides no new funding.

A HAJJ RIGHT

The Berkeley school district near Chicago was recently sued by the federal government for denying leave to a Muslim middle school teacher so that she could make the Hajj, a religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims are expected to make at least one Hajj if they are physically and financially able to do so. The government claimed the school district violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by failing to accommodate her religious practices.



CLICK IT OR NOT

A three-year study in Alabama found that seat belts on school buses in the state would save the life of only one child every eight years. Researchers advised spending money instead on making buses safer when loading and dropping off children. That's when most deaths occur. "If the money is available, it would be much better spent training drivers, teachers and students," study leader Dan Turner told the Associated Press. Putting belts on most buses costs between \$11,000 to \$15,000 per bus and requires larger seats, reducing the number of students the bus can carry. In many cases, the study found, students ignore the requirement to wear the belts.

IPAD PILOT

Virginia is experimenting with iPads in the statehouse. Information Systems Director Sharon Crouch Steidel has chosen 15 lucky delegates, with varying degrees of computer skills, to participate. They'll be able to look up bills and all kinds of information while on the floor or in committee without having to carry around bulkier and heavier laptops. "I'm 64 years old. I'm old school, and I just didn't know how to use a laptop. This iPad, you just zap-tap it. Man, I love it," Virginia Delegate Lionell Spruill told Stateline.org. Fifteen senators are also trying out the popular tablets. Among other benefits, Steidel is hoping to cut down on the amount of paper used in the statehouse.



CAPITOL KEYS

North Dakota recently spruced up its legislative hearing rooms in the Capitol with new carpeting, tables, video screens and audio equipment to improve lawmakers' working area and make it easier for visitors to follow what's going on during hearings. The most criticism from taxpayers, however, was aimed at the \$2,500 electric piano. It replaced a traditional piano bought in 1977. According to the Associated Press, the Senate chorus that practices regularly during session will use it. The new piano will also be easier to move around for events such as the annual lighting of the state Christmas tree. It was time for "something that sounds a little bit better and looks a little better," Senator Carolyn Nelson told AP.

FLUNKING AT FINANCE

A 50-state survey of financial knowledge by the Investor Education Foundation of the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority asked more than 28,000 Americans how they manage their resources and make financial decisions. The survey ranked states in four categories based on how well their citizens were at: balancing monthly income and expenses, planning ahead for emergencies, managing financial products and knowing basic financial information and making good decisions. The results show significant differences across state lines and demographic groups. The survey found that citizens of New York, New Jersey and New Hampshire are the most financially capable, while residents of Kentucky and Montana were among the least financially capable. More than 55 percent of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck. And, on average, Americans were able to answer correctly only three of five questions about basic financial concepts. "This study highlights how important improving financial education is for Americans, especially during times of financial insecurity," said Foundation Chairman Rick Ketchum. "While the current economic conditions can exacerbate the consequences of poor financial decisions, some states are still well ahead of others."