

A Tale of Two Seats

A major U. S. airline recently proposed imposing a surcharge on extremely obese passengers. Their argument was that that it costs them more to fly a large passenger because he or she effectively occupies two seats, so they cannot sell the adjacent seat and thereby suffer an economic loss. Naturally, those who would be affected have been unhappy about the proposal, calling it discriminatory.

This issue is not really about health promotion. No one seriously claims that imposing the extra fare will induce people to lose weight. Rather, it is a policy debate. While I do know something about the causes and treatment of obesity, I claim no particular expertise in the policy domain. Accordingly, although my opinion is no more worthy of respect than anyone else's, there may be some value in framing the debate carefully. My goal is to clarify the central issue so that the democratic process can forge a fair resolution. There are attendant side issues introduced that cloud the discussion, such as how to decide whether a given passenger should be identified as obese, along with the potential humiliation attendant upon that characterization.

If we accept the airline's position at face value, they feel trapped by historical precedent into absorbing an economic loss. A "one person, one seat" policy has always been the norm for public transportation

modes. No system charges passengers by the pound, although that might be logically defensible if costs are proportional to passenger weight. In contrast, freight is typically charged according to weight; does applying the same rule to obese people dehumanize them?

A surcharge on large passengers acts like a sin tax, treating the obese as though they should be responsible for their condition in the same way we ask alcoholics to pay a tax for their sin. Is the right to purchase public transportation similar to the right to purchase a home, one that should be subject to equal protection under the law? Or can the airline claim that obesity is not a protected status?

An alternative approach is to treat obesity in the same way we treat many other afflictions, sharing the burden across all taxpayers. If losses can truly be demonstrated, society might subsidize those losses with public funds.

It's easy for folks who think they will not be personally affected to let the airlines and the obese passengers fight it out, perhaps in the courts. A more proactive approach is for public officials to think about this matter carefully, balancing the interests of an ever-increasing, easily victimized group and an industry that has in recent years been battered by economic forces beyond its control.

Editor,
Jie Weiss