
Bottle law: It's about the money

By Paul McMorrow

July 29, 2011

A BILL to expand the bottle law in Massachusetts is supposed to rid landfills of plastic water bottles by slapping a five-cent deposit on the containers. It's also supposed to pump \$20 million into state coffers, as policymakers expect consumers to give up the nickel deposits on hundreds of millions of bottles every year. There's a reason those two outcomes appear to be at odds with each other: They are.

The bill pits environmentalists against beverage industry interests. The state's environmental lobby, as it does every legislative session, says that beverage buying habits have left the current bottle law behind, and as a result, state landfills are choked with recyclables; they're pushing to bring water bottles, juices, and sports drinks under the nickel-deposit regime currently governing beer and soda. Just as reliably, the folks who make, distribute, and sell the bottles say that price hikes will be inevitable, and will break the backs of hardworking families.

Lost in the back and forth is the fact that the bottle bill is not about environmental policy. Like many fights on Beacon Hill, this is more about money and political control than it is about effective policy.

Currently, nickel deposits on beer and soda containers serve to reward those who manage to resist the overwhelming urge to toss their empties into a lake, as well as those who haul their empties to a package store, rather than dumping them in a municipal recycling bin. The existing law was once structured to promote wider recycling efforts, beyond beer and soda. Unclaimed deposits had been earmarked for a Clean Environment Fund, which was supposed to help spread and subsidize municipal recycling efforts. Then-Governor Mitt Romney and the Legislature raided the fund back in 2003, in the name of balancing a budget. Unclaimed deposits have remained in the state's general fund ever since, even in years when the budget was flush with tax receipts.

The Clean Environment Fund makes a comeback in the bottle bill being debated on Beacon Hill. But everybody knows the Legislature doesn't normally unhand piles of money, especially eight years after snatching them. Backers of the bottle bill hope to dedicate a portion of unclaimed bottle deposits toward environmental efforts through the Clean Environment Fund. Because unclaimed deposits are projected to grow by \$20 million annually, lawmakers wouldn't actually be forfeiting much cash. The bill grows the pool of unclaimed deposits, and everybody would get to keep a piece of the action.

The bottle bill's backers estimate that Massachusetts consumers will walk away from \$20 million in new deposits on bottled water and sports drinks, on top of the nearly \$40 million in beer and soda deposits they left on the table this year. That's several hundred million containers annually. The figures suggest that the lure of a nickel isn't what it used to be. But they also suggest the existence of an alternate means of processing those containers.

An expansion of the bottle law wouldn't move the needle on the state's overall recycling rate in any meaningful way. It focuses on a finite slice of all the solid waste Massachusetts produces, and then attacks that portion of the state's waste stream with an inefficient solution.

Recycling bottles through deposits costs four times more than recycling them through curbside bins, and an expanded bottle law would widen this disparity. It's cheaper and more convenient to dump bottles in a recycling bin than it is to drive them to the grocery store. That's why expanding the bottle law would likely only increase statewide recycling rates by 0.12 percent.

In the nearly 30 years since Massachusetts first passed the bottle bill, we've found a better way to recycle empty containers. It would be more economical to take the money that would be spent on expanding the law, and instead beef up residential recycling programs, and set up new recycling systems on public streets and in parks. But doing so would cut the stream of nickels available to the Legislature. If lawmakers do vote to expand the bottle law, it won't be because they're after efficient environmental policy. They'll just be passing the best policy that still keeps

it them in the money.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at CommonWealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

© Copyright 2011 Globe New s paper Company.
