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Expand N.Y. bottle bill to make more containers returnable



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New York State's returnable container act, better known as the bottle bill, is a legendary public policy success. Among the most remarkable aspects of the measure, is the fact that it far exceeded its original objectives and expectations.

Once seen as an anti-litter strategy (it has served that function admirably, helping make the state's streets cleaner, its playgrounds safer and its communities more livable), the bottle bill has proved to be equally effective as a means of diverting valuable scrap materials from landfills and incinerators. Since the law was enacted 20 years ago, more than 75 billion containers have been returned for the nickel deposit.

That's 5.2 million tons of glass, plastic and metal that did not go into the waste stream – for a savings to New York's taxpayers of over \$300 million.

Successful though it has been, the bottle bill could be improved with a timely update. The framers of the original law in 1982 did not foresee the dramatic increase in juice drinks that has occurred over the past 20 years, nor could they have imagined a whole new array of beverages including bottled water, sports drinks, and iced tea that are increasingly popular today. These non-carbonated drinks represent the fastest growing segment of the beverage market and already account for 20 percent of non-alcoholic, non-dairy beverage containers. These non-carbonated, non-alcoholic drinks need to be brought into the bottle bill program.

Nickels that are not redeemed by consumers now are kept by large bottling concerns. Since unredeemed deposits represent a public expense — such containers have to be picked up and disposed of by public works departments — common sense dictates that the money, estimated at more than \$130 million a year, should be returned to the state for solid waste funding.

The bottle bill continues to enjoy re-

sounding popularity. An independent poll released this month (commissioned by a coalition of groups advocating for bottle bill reform) showed overwhelming support by New York voters for the current bottle bill (84 percent), for expanding the law to include non-carbonated beverages (70 percent) and for directing the unclaimed deposits to the state for environmental spending (86 percent).

The state's bottle bill has allowed New Yorkers to become full partners in a system that averts disposal costs, creates employment, and is a fair, reasonable, economical and effective means of conserving resources. Common sense updates to the law, however, are perennially stopped by powerful bottling industry lobbyists. Since there is a financial component to the reforms, we can only hope that the current budget crisis will open lawmaker's minds to what the public already understands: the time has come to bring this remarkably successful program up to date.

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