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Special interests at it again

So much for expanding the state's bottle-return law. Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno declared it dead last week.

The amendment to the very successful bottle- and can-recycling program, passed earlier by the State Assembly, included water, iced tea and sports drink containers not covered in the original legislation. Including those containers in what today is an outdated law would have kept up to 2.6 million containers from state landfills each year, proponents say.

And the expansion of the bill would allow the state to keep the money from unredeemed deposits for use on environmental programs.

Passing an expansion of the law "is one of the dumbest things that has happened in the legislature on the Assembly side," Bruno said last week. "We're going to make rubbish carriers out of everybody that goes shopping. It's just nonsense."

Given that remark, we might speculate that Bruno probably throws his empty spaghetti-sauce jars, his tuna fish cans and empty plastic milk containers in with his regular garbage. Rubbish carriers?

It's too bad Bruno, the chief honcho of the Republican-controlled State Senate, doesn't want to do his environmental duty. There are probably any number of his subordinates who would back expansion of the bottle bill if they weren't fearful of not supporting their leader.

It's disappointing. There are a number of states that are updating their bottle bills. Maine, California and Hawaii already have bottle laws that include water, juice and other non-carbonated drink containers. Maine, Michigan and Massachusetts have amended their laws so the states can keep the unredeemed deposits.

Such laws, however, don't sit well with the beverage industry, which sees them as unnecessary and expensive. But the state's bottle-bill advocates say New Yorkers overwhelmingly support the current law and its proposed changes.

The nickel deposits now add up to about \$140 million a year. That amount could've reached \$180 million had the bill be expanded.

Grocers don't like the current law let alone an expansion of it. They says it's an inefficient way to recycle. They also contend the empty bottles and cans they're forced to collect attract rats, mice and cockroaches into their stores.

They've pushed for an alternative bill that repeals the current law and replaces it with a recycling program based on the one used in New Jersey. That would charge manufacturers and wholesalers a small fee to fund municipal curbside recycling and litter-control programs.

Once again, folks, special-interest money is the reason the state refuses to do the right thing. It's too bad.

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