

## Battle over bottles brewing in Capitol

Lines drawn on deposit expansion for plain water

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HARTFORD — A battle royal is shaping up over a controversial expansion of the bottle-deposit law that would require new, nickel deposits on millions of bottles of non-carbonated water sold in Connecticut.

First-term Senate President Pro Tempore Donald E. Williams Jr. is putting the weight of his office behind the legislation, which nearly died in the Environment Committee, but was massively amended and revived in the Senate on April 20.

After passing the Senate 31-3, it's now sitting on the House calendar, where, Capitol insiders believe, it doesn't have enough votes — yet — to pass the 151-member chamber.

Indeed, Williams, D-Brooklyn, hosted a Capitol reception Thursday evening for environmental activists, whom he has asked for help. He said that industry "disinformation" through a late-breaking but high-powered lobbying campaign, is attempting to kill the bill in the House.

Opponents of the bottle-deposit expansion include grocery and convenience-store owners and beverage bottlers and distributors, many of whom believe that the current bottle-deposit program should be abandoned and the curbside-recycling program expanded.

Store owners led by the Connecticut Food Association say the deposit-return program is messy, smelly, unsanitary and costly enough without expanding it to include millions more water bottles each year.

But Williams, a former chairman of the Environment Committee and Rep. Richard Roy, D-Milford, a current co-chairman, said the bill's a logical way to take the polyethylene terephthalate (or PET) plastic bottles out of the waste stream and away from the state's solid waste incinerators.

"There's no question that we have a fight in terms of the soda lobby and bottlers versus

environmentalists," Williams said in an interview last week. "In the lobbying campaign and the radio ads that are being run, they're trying to convince people it's a tax and the costs were astronomical."

With no incentive to recycle the now-ubiquitous water bottles, more and more are ending up littering beaches, soccer and Little League fields and highways. Ironically, Williams said, the market has never been higher for PET plastic, which is used to manufacture fleece sweaters and other synthetic fabrics. Williams and Roy agree if the curbside recycling program includes all bottles and cans, more people will simply throw away the containers.

"Forty to 60 percent of roadside litter are portable beverage containers," Williams said. "Curbside recycling is great for your spaghetti-sauce jars and cans of Campbell's Soup, but portable beverage containers don't get caught."

Roy, in an interview Friday, conceded that there doesn't seem to be enough support in the House, which has a 99-52 Democratic majority.

"Would it pass today? I don't know, but I certainly hope we vote on it by the end of next week," Roy said. "It's Sen. Williams' bill and it's important."

Roy agreed that lobbyists are pulling out the stops and using "fear-mongering" tactics to drum up opposition. "They're saying, Even though we produce, deliver and sell the stuff, let's make taxpayers pay the bill," Roy said. "They say curbside recycling is cheaper, but it's not. They don't want to take responsibility for putting the trash in the system."

Roy, as committee co-chairman, voted against an amendment that essentially gutted the bill, restricting the expansion of the redemption law until surrounding states adopted similar legislation.

Williams stripped the amendment in the Senate, reverting it back to the original bill and sending industry lobbyists into high gear.

Betty McLaughlin, director of environmental affairs for the Connecticut Audubon Society, warned last week that opponents, including Coke, Pepsi and Poland Spring, all of which are major players in the state's lucrative non-carbonated water industry, are spending more than a quarter-million dollars to help defeat the bill.

"These giant corporations and trade associations have hired the most influential and best-paid lobbyists at the Capitol," McLaughlin said. "Together these lobbying firms have 25 to 30 professional lobbyists spending all day pressuring legislators to vote against the environment."

But Grace Nome, president of the Connecticut Food Association, who represents supermarkets and groceries, said the bill is ill conceived and anti-business.

"Expansion of the bottle law is probably the worst thing you could do to the grocery industry," Nome said last week, adding that it could cost the state's grocers another \$16 million a year to expand current redemption equipment and accommodate the millions of additional plastic bottles.

"We learned to manage what we've had to manage, but we put our cost to manage the bottle law on your food," Nome said. She said that because it's usually easier to redeem containers at groceries than liquor stores, the food industry redeems 2.5 times what they sell.

"The point is, that maybe people who are supporting this don't understand the complexity of the issue," said Nome, a 26-year veteran of Capitol lobbying. "Fifty percent of the cans and bottles in the garbage are deposit bottles."

Nome said she had hoped that the bill would have come up from a House debate last Wednesday or Thursday, when she believed there weren't enough votes to approve it.

"We have offered as an industry to sit down and talk about litter," Nome said. "The ShopRite in Milford has offered to pay for the cleanup of the Milford beaches."

Adding water bottles to the recycling stream will exacerbate an already dirty business.

"The grocery industry does more for the people of this state than anything else," Nome said, predicted that if the bill passes

and takes effect next Jan. 1, water bottles from New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island would be redeemed by the thousands at Connecticut supermarkets.

Paul Nonnenmacher, director of public affairs for the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority, which operates the state's solid-waste programs, said Friday the CRRA backs the bottle-bill expansion.

But it would come at a price to taxpayers, because the sale of recyclables lowers tipping fees for municipal garbage trucks at the regional garbage-to-energy incinerators, he said.

"We support the idea, but as we had told the Environment Committee, when we testified, there's going to be a revenue loss by taking away these recyclable commodities, it will have an impact on tip fees," Nonnenmacher said.

He said that the CRRA would probably become more actively in favor of the legislation, if it included a provision to pass along a \$20 million-a-year windfall to the authority. It's called "escheats" and it coincides with the unclaimed bottle deposits that distributors and bottlers retain from bottles and cans that are tossed into the waste stream, rather than redeemed, each year.

Nonnenmacher said the CRRA is eagerly awaiting a state Department of Environmental Protection study of the state's solid-waste projects and the creation of a new solid-waste management plan by the end of the year.

"This is an opportunity for the DEP to take a holistic approach," he said, "because each of these items is a piece of a bigger puzzle."

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