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Cynthia Baker & Susan Millinger: Let voters strengthen the Massachusetts bottle bill

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AMHERST — In 1983, the bottle bill went into effect in Massachusetts, providing a 5 cent deposit on carbonated beverages like Coke and Pepsi and beer in cans or bottles. People could take the empty cans and bottles to redemption centers to get a refund of their deposit.

Before the late 1970s, most beverages were sold in refillable bottles: The consumer paid a deposit in order to be encouraged to return them. The bottle bill was in that sense a return to earlier practices, not a drastic new direction.

Since the law was implemented, more than 35 billion beverage containers have been redeemed in Massachusetts, an estimated 70 percent of the drinks consumed. In addition, another 10 percent are recycled through other collection programs. The bottle bill has been the state's single most effective recycling and anti-litter tool. Yet people's tastes and purchasing habits have changed.

Since the initial legislation, other bottled and canned beverages — juices, water, flavored water, tea and energy drinks — have emerged. Of an estimated 3.3 billion beverages consumed annually in Massachusetts, 1.3 billion are these “new-age” drinks, and this number is expected to increase. These drinks do not fall under the aegis of the 1983 bottle bill. Unfortunately, containers not covered by the 5 cent deposit are 3.5 times more likely to end up as litter.

It's estimated that only 23 percent of these containers are recycled.

For the past few years, a number of organizations in Massachusetts have pushed to update the bottle bill to cover the newer types of canned and bottled beverages. The bill would add noncarbonated beverages excluding dairy products, infant formula and FDA-approved medicines. It would not apply to juice boxes and cardboard containers.

People want it. Recent polls show that 77 percent of the general public supports an expanded bottle bill. More than 200 cities and towns have endorsed the initiative, including Amherst, Leverett, Northampton and Pelham.

Yet legislative efforts have gotten nowhere. Special interests seemed to have stemmed the tide of change. Therefore

a number of environmental and civic organizations, including the Audubon Society, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts, MassPIRG, the Sierra Club and the Massachusetts Municipal Association, created a coalition to work for the updated bill. More than 300 businesses have joined the coalition. Gov. Deval Patrick, state Reps. Stephen Kulik, Peter Kocot, John Scibak and Ellen Story and state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg all support updating the bottle bill.

The Massachusetts Coalition to Update the Bottle Bill decided to begin an initiative and petition campaign in order to put the issue on the November 2014 ballot. The petition must have the signatures of 68,911 registered voters by Dec. 4. The proposal then goes to the state Legislature. If the Legislature fails to enact it before the first Wednesday in May 2014, coalition members must gather another 11,485 signatures from registered voters by July 2014 to place the initiative on the November 2014 ballot.

Why should we support such a bill? Because it would significantly reduce litter. "On the go" bottled and canned drinks tend to end up as trash in public places. Carbonated drinks and beer containers that have a 5 cent deposit most often get collected and redeemed. Anne Borg, co-president of the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts, says the pattern is clear. "Look around any playground and you see discarded water bottles, but few discarded soda cans. Expanding deposits will also reduce the costs to cities and towns to collect and dispose of trash that includes containers that should be recycled."

The League of Women Voters in Amherst, as one of the supporting organizations, has started collecting signatures of registered voters. We encourage people to sign the petition to place the Updated Bottle Bill on the ballot in November 2014 so we can continue to help the environment by increasing recycling and reducing litter and trash.

Cynthia Brubaker and Susan Millinger are members of the League of Women Voters of Amherst.

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