

Bottle deposit poor way to address litter problem

On its face, the idea of placing a 5-cent redeemable deposit on all individual containers of beer, water and soft drinks might seem to be a good way to reduce the amount of litter by Tennessee's roadsides. After all, if there is cash to be had by returning those empty bottles and cans, maybe people would not be so quick to toss them in a ditch.

That's why Dr. Marge Davis, Tennessee Bottle Bill project coordinator, believes Tennessee should join the 11 other states that now have deposits on beverage containers. She believes passage of a container fee will reduce litter in Tennessee, bolster recycling efforts and provide fund-raising opportunities for school and civic organizations.

Even though the bottle bill died in a state House subcommittee last year, Davis and the bill's sponsor, Rep. Russell Johnson, R-Loudon, hope the measure will enjoy more success in the current session of the General Assembly.

Proponents point to an informal survey conducted in November that suggests 56 percent of roadside trash consists of beverage containers.

About 150 volunteers collected trash along 20.4 miles of road in 11 of Tennessee's 95 counties, separating the beverage containers from the rest of the litter. Of the 4,602 total gallons of the litter picked up, 2,580.5 gallons were found to be bottles and cans.

Given those figures, one might argue that Tennessee should employ something as proactive as a deposit law in the fight to reduce litter.

Certainly, the intentions of those who back the bottle bill are good: Tennessee is too beautiful a state to be spoiled by the sight of bottles and cans strewn about the landscape.

Even so, attaching a 5-cent deposit to beverage containers in Tennessee is not the answer to solving the problem. What is needed is a comprehensive approach to litter control that encourages Tennesseans to recycle — not to collect nickels, but because it's the right thing to do.

As currently written, the bottle bill would apply just to glass, aluminum and plastic containers of beer, soft drinks,

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mineral water, juices, teas, coffee drinks, sports drinks, wine coolers and other beverages. It does not include milk and other dairy products or wine and liquor.

Retailers say the out-of-pocket cost for consumers will likely increase to 8 cents as businesses pass on the additional 3-cent handling fee the new program would require. That's why business leaders like Steve Smith, the president and CEO of Food City K-VA-T Food Stores, are calling the proposal a "bottle tax."

As Press staff writer Gregg Powers reported recently, grocers, convenience store operators and other beverage retailers say Tennessee doesn't need to

burden their customers with any additional costs on top of the state's already high sales tax. They fear many Tennesseans might do their shopping in neighboring states that don't saddle consumers with a bottle deposit fee in addition to a maximum 9.75 percent sales tax.

Such costs might be tolerable if the bottle bill addressed the bulk of the litter problem in Tennessee. Unfortunately, it doesn't.

Tom Salter, executive director of Keep Knoxville Beautiful, says national and local studies suggest the bureaucracy that would be established under the bottle bill neglects to address roughly 90 percent of the litter found in Tennessee. That includes the fast food containers that are too often found by the side of the road.

At the same time, the bottle bill threatens to reduce state funding now going to local communities for litter collection and voluntary recycling programs. Instead of taking dollars away from these valuable programs, the state should be putting more money into an aggressive public information campaign that promotes recycling and discourages littering.

The cost of the bottle bill is too much to ask from the already overtaxed citizens of Tennessee who are not likely to see their nickels go to a real reduction in litter.

