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Bill isn't litter control, it's higher prices and lost retail sales

By **STEVE SMITH**
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State Rep. Russell Johnson of Loudon has proposed legislation for a bottle tax in Tennessee. While portrayed as litter control, the measure simply would result in higher consumer prices and larger state government and would fail miserably in controlling litter.

Johnson's proposal would force a 5-cent deposit charge on customers and an additional 3-cent handling fee on distributors, for a total of 8 cents. This increase would, in effect, double our already high sales tax. For example, it would require the addition of almost \$2 to the purchase price of every case of soda, bottled water, beer or fruit juice.

East Tennesseans recognize the value of protecting our environment and agree we should all do our part to ensure a beautiful, litter-free landscape. A clean environment is critical to achieving a higher quality of life.

For that reason, Food City and other Tennessee grocers strongly support the litter grant program, which has been in existence since 1982. The progressive project, which is funded by a soft drink and beer tax, consists of a comprehensive county-by-county litter control program calling for the collection of trash along area roads. This approach has been extremely successful because it addresses the cleanup of all types of litter rather than focusing on one narrow waste stream.

While Johnson has chosen an admirable goal, he's simply selected the wrong avenue of fulfillment. In a recent News Sentinel statement, Tom Salter, executive director for Keep Knoxville Beautiful, pointed out that a forced deposit plan would not be effective because it's not a comprehensive approach. A report by Virginia-based environmental consultant Gershman, Brickner & Bratton states that forced bottle legislation has proven bureaucratic, duplicates voluntary and other government recycling efforts and is not the effective solution its proponents declare. The bureaucracy is so high that states with forced bottle deposits spend 4.24 cents per recovered container.

Johnson's proposal to increase the size of state government ignores the existence of highly successful programs at work, like the litter grant. These programs are keeping our roads clean and our state beautiful.

There are other reasons to oppose the concept and voice our concerns to elected leaders within the Tennessee General Assembly:

* Forced deposit programs require new government bureaucracy to collect your money, regulate and subsidize redemption centers and pay refunds. We do not need more bureaucrats to clean up litter.

* The bill would cost the state jobs and tax dollars. Tennessee's neighbors would like nothing better than another new tax to drive Tennessee customers to shop in their states. The result would be fewer Tennessee retail jobs and lower state tax revenues. Mississippi and Kentucky recently rejected similar legislation for these same reasons.

* Deposits ignore more than 90 percent of litter causes. National research shows beverage containers account for less than 9 percent of road and park litter. And only 5 percent of beverage containers sold are consumed in cars.



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* The proponents of the plan are hoping the program doesn't work too well because they are promising tens of millions of dollars in unclaimed deposits to fund other state programs. In fact, residents from neighboring states will be able to redeem their bottles and cans in Tennessee and obtain a refund. This fraudulent activity is almost impossible to police and will drain away any excess program funds.

Only 11 states have container deposits, and Hawaii is the only state to pass such a law in the last 20 years. Citizens, lawmakers and environmentalists in other states rely on comprehensive litter control programs and broad-based programs like curbside recycling to address a broader waste stream at a lower cost.

* A forced deposit approach will also result in health and safety issues, turning food store operators into garbage collectors. We don't need the pest infestation and contamination issues caused by storing and handling empty containers.

Already I have heard from many customers opposed to this ineffective, inconvenient approach. The forced deposit law, although intending a positive outcome, will instead result in higher prices, lost retail sales, reduced state revenues, inconvenienced consumers and weaker litter and recycling programs.

Steve Smith is president and CEO of K-VA-T Food Stores and a member of the Tennessee Grocers & Convenience Store Association. He lives in Bristol, Va.

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