

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Between now and November 2nd there's going to be no end of argument pro and con the bottle bill, question 6 on the Ballot. In case you didn't already guess, I am in favor of the bottle bill.

Before we join the fray, let's establish what the scrap is all about. The proposal would require a 5-cent deposit on beer and soft-drink containers, and would outlaw flip-top cans.

The nickel deposits will not apply to such containers as mayonnaise jars, ketchup bottles, or canned foods; it applies only to the beverages mentioned.

Supporters of the bill believe passage will reduce litter, save space in solid waste disposal areas, cut down on waste of glass and metal -- both recyclable materials -- and save energy now spent to produce new containers and dispose of used ones.

A statement released recently by the League of Women Voters declares, "Fifteen billion cans and bottles end up as litter every year. Beverage containers account for between 60 percent and 80 percent of all litter in the United States."

Since only 4 percent of all beverage containers being produced now are returnables, where but the roadsides would the majority of those billions of cans and bottles go? That's where we see them, too.

At a nickel apiece, the average American family might come out ahead, especially if there's an enterprising youngster amongst them. Conceivably \$750,000,000 could be paid in deposits on returnable containers, and the same amount be redeemed as bottles and cans are brought back. Every year.

Can't you see little boys and girls combing the bushes for throw-away bottles and cans and returning them to stores?

I can. It'll seem like a replay when it happens because that's how we earned spending money when we were kids.

As recently as the 1950s approximately 98 percent of all soft drinks were sold in returnable bottles. The average number of returns, per bottle, was between 25 and 30. In 1974, even with returnables down to only 4 percent of all bottles manufactured, the number of trips per bottle, on a national average, was 11.

That's still above the eight to ten trips per bottle needed, according to the National Soft Drink Association, to break even on manufacturing and transportation costs.

In 1970, in connection with the investigation of cyclamates in soft drinks, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare found the average life of a returnable bottle was five years.

On the other side of the question, opponents of the bill will warn it could cost, if passed, each Massachusetts family \$100 a year. This claim is derived from projections of an industry study that 57 percent of Massachusetts residents who now buy returnables do not return them. Applying the same percentage to all families in the state, the lost deposits would work out to \$58 per household per year.

To pare that part of the cost, of course, all that need be done is to get the bottles and cans back to the store.

The balance is said to be increased costs of handling, storing and sorting the returnables, as the bill would require. This statement is based on an EPA statistic; in Vermont, after passage of the mandatory deposit law, handling costs for beer and soda increased.

As far as it goes, that's true; however, the next sentence of the EPA statement reads, "The price increase cannot be attributed solely to the deposit law . . . given that during this period, prices of sugar, containers, and labor also increased. . ."

EPA officials in Boston are studying the claims being made by the industry to determine if facts have been distorted. Let's hope they reach and publish a conclusion before the election.

Incidentally, in Oregon and Vermont, states with legislation similar to that proposed by question 6, the rate of bottle return rose to around 90 percent after deposit laws

The bottling and beverages industries are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to convince the voting public in Massachusetts the bottle bill is disadvantageous to the average family.

Industry spokesman Robert F. Caulfield, director of the Committee to Protect Jobs and the Use of Convenience Containers in Massachusetts, admits his group plans to spend around \$700,000 to fight the bill.

As of September 15th, the committee has already spent \$462,843 in the Commonwealth to oppose question 6 on the ballot.

These figures are on record at the state Campaign and Political Finance Office. The contributions are legal. Funds totaling \$102,385 have been raised by Coca Cola botlers in different parts of the country; Pepsi contributed \$43,000; four beer companies in Milwaukee chipped in \$18,750 between them. The largest single contribution, \$150,000, came from the Can Manufacturers Institute in Washington, D.C.

One of the few major brewers to state publicly that he favors deposit legislation, William Coors, reports bottlers

have budgeted \$20,000,000 to fight "bottle bills" not only in Massachusetts, but also in Michigan, Maine and Colorado.

In spite of Mr. Coors having come out in favor of deposit legislation, Adolph Coors Company has contributed \$11,160 to support the anti-bottle bill campaign in Massachusetts.

Although Coors beer is not sold in this state, sufficient pressure has been brought to bear to elicit financial support for the industry's position.

Spending money to fight bottle bills has sometimes paid off in other parts of the country. In 1974 Dade County, Florida, tested a mandatory deposit ordinance.

The opponents outspent deposit advocates by \$150 to \$1, saturating the county with newspaper, supermarket and billboard ads, as well as TV and radio commercials during the final two weeks of campaigning.

The ordinance was defeated by 55 to 45 percent of the vote.

Only \$10,000 has been raised for advertising purposes by advocates of the bottle bill in Massachusetts. The only way the public can hope to hear both sides is through the press in articles like this one.

Ordinary people like you and me are going to make the decision on the 2nd of November, at the polls. It comes down to a question of what's best for the people in Massachusetts.

Do we continue to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in taxes to clean up our roadsides, to bury throw-away cans and bottles? Do we encourage waste or do we encourage saving?

It's obvious the canning, bottling and beverage industries see no particular need to conserve resources, energy, landfill space or reduce litter. Are we going to let them decide where our tax dollars will be spent? They, and the products they offer us in the packages they provide, now cost America millions of dollars every year, just to clean up the waste.

Not even an industry the size of this one, spending the kind of money it's prepared to, can fool everyone forever. Most Americans are smart enough to know it's more expensive to throw things away after they've been used once than it is to use them over and over again.

No one has to be a genius to figure that out.