

# Cleaning up the litter

## Chester Smolski

The last time the Environmental Protection Agency checked the numbers, it determined that eight million tons of America's annual municipal solid waste load was in the form of bottle and can beverage containers. Much of this was picked up from highways before it eventually reached municipal landfills.

A more recent EPA study suggested that as many as 215 million individual items of litter are picked up each year from highways, 43 percent of this in the form of metal, glass and plastic (primarily containers). Such is the price of affluence.

Ours is a rich society, able to buy all the latest gadgets at the drop of a buck, whether it be CB radios, a third television set, disposable bottles and cans or whatever, and literally throw them away in any convenient and available location. Americans have been called slobs because of this practice of littering anywhere and everywhere.

It is ironic that we, as a group of people able to travel the world over, marvel at the cleanliness of the Dutch, the Germans, the English, the Japanese and a host of others, in their cities or their countryside — and then return to this country, describe the joys of a clean environment, and keep on with our slovenly ways.

The problem of litter is too obvious in our state of Rhode Island, and especially in our cities. Efforts to change our ways have periodically appeared in the form of voluntary efforts and sometimes in the educational process, but to date with no lasting success. The litter continues and all of us pay, either in dollars to clean it up, in loss of beauty as we desecrate our environment, and in loss of pride. Who

can be proud of filthy downtowns or garbage-strewn highways?

Most recent efforts to do something about the problem have appeared in the General Assembly where a series of hearings before a legislative commission is under way to address the issue, determine what can be done about it, and — one hopes — pass a bill (one is already in the House) to combat the problem.

The costs of cleaning up litter in Rhode Island were dramatically brought to the commission's attention recently by the assistant director of maintenance for the state Department of Transportation. He stated that this state spent approximately one-half million dollars to clear litter from its highways in 1978, a cost 40 percent greater than in 1977; a situation which he termed "critical." This cost is for clearing state highways only; figures are not available for local efforts by cities and towns to clean litter from their own streets.

In his testimony before the commission, the director said that approximately 48 percent of this litter is in the form of bottles and cans. There is no question that bottles and cans with no monetary value (i.e., no deposit when purchased) are treated with less deference than those which have added value placed on them. Even though some local efforts have been made to recycle aluminum cans and bottles, these efforts are miniscule in terms of the magnitude of the problem.

Other states have had good success with such container-deposit legislation, including Oregon, Michigan and three New England states, Connecticut, Vermont and Maine. In a recent four-month study in Maine, it was determined that bottle litter was reduced by 69 percent and over-all litter by 64 percent, attributable to the enactment of such legislation.

Who would oppose such efforts to save

resources and contribute to a cleaner environment? A recent case in Nebraska singles out some of the activists. A year ago, in a poll taken by the *North Platte Telegraph*, 71 percent of the public favored and 21 percent opposed deposits on beverage bottles. In the ensuing year an extensive anti-deposit campaign took place, heavily financed from outside the state. A beer manufacturer, a cola company and a can organization were major contributors for the heavy use of advertising in radio, television, and newspapers. This well-financed effort by special-interest groups paid off: the deposit bill was defeated by the voters by a 57 to 43 percent margin.

Some labor organizations and supermarkets also have opposed this legislation because they fear the loss of jobs or the extra bother of handling returns. But such organizations are not the real losers in deposit legislation; rather, it is the consumer. It is the consumer who must bear the economic, aesthetic and social burden of highways and countryside littered by potentially reusable resources at a time when we are told to make better use of our resources.

Our environment, our pride, our resources, our sense of cleanliness, beauty and order are too important to be left to the influence of the few whose interests are short term and not in the public good. The legislative commission and the General Assembly must speak for all of us and not the few. They can do this by enacting a bottle and can deposit law during this session.

A public hearing before the commission is scheduled today at 3 p.m. in Room 313 of the State House.

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