

# Beverage Containers—To Return Or Not to Return

If Congress doesn't bring beverage container legislation to the nation this year, the nation's capital may well bring it to Congress. That is becoming an increasingly real possibility as the District of Columbia and three neighboring counties in Virginia and Maryland move ahead with serious consideration of model legislation to require five cent deposits on all soft drink and beer containers and a ban on flip-top cans. Hearings already have been held by three local governments, with enactment given strong chances in D.C. and Montgomery County, Maryland, in the near future.

In recent years, beverage containers have been the focus of particular concern in the nation's efforts to come to grips with its massive solid waste management problems. During the past 15 years, the country has witnessed a major shift in manufacturing and consumer preference toward disposable convenience packaging. Between 1959 and 1972, the total number of containers jumped 221 percent, from 15.4 billion to 55.7 billion. And by 1980, that number is expected to soar 80 billion.

Needless to say, beverage containers are the fastest growing portion of all municipal wastes, presently accounting for more than eight percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. In terms of litter, they account for 20 percent of the total number of litter items and 70 percent of the volume.

Proposed solutions to this mounting problem have taken a variety of forms. Some groups, such as Keep America

Beautiful, Inc., an industry-sponsored non-profit organization, view litter as a people-caused problem. Its solution is to educate people to not litter. Others, such as the National Center for Resource Recovery, Inc., another industry-backed group, advocate the development of technologies which will separate solid waste into its different recoverable components and recycle them for reuse.

With the price of virgin materials climbing while domestic supplies are shrinking an average of \$300 worth of aluminum, \$30 worth of steel, and \$20 worth of glass in a ton of municipal wastes, there's growing incentive to mine the nation's waste piles. NCRR already has a contract with New Orleans to set up a recovery facility to handle the city's wastes, and it is negotiating to do the same for Washington, D.C.

Undoubtedly the most visible and politically controversial solution to the beverage container litter problem has been to require a deposit on all beverage containers to encourage their return. In these days of energy consciousness, the fact that a returnable bottle filled 15 times will use 50 to 85 percent less energy than a one-way container does not go unnoticed among the advocates of returnables. According to some experts, a nationwide return to returnable would save enough electric power to be used by two and a half million people.

The "bottle bill" idea has instigated a lot of heated debate, with its environmental proponents as strong in their advocacy as its industry opponents. It gained national credibility in 1972 when Oregon broke ranks with the rest of the states to enact a bill that not only institutes the nickel deposit requirement and a flip-top can ban, but also creates incentives for the manufacture of standardized containers that are interchangeable among different companies. Since then, Oregon has reported container litter to be down about 70 percent. Retailers have not gone out of business; sales are not down. While skilled jobs have been lost in the container manufacturing industries, they've been replaced substantially by lower paying,

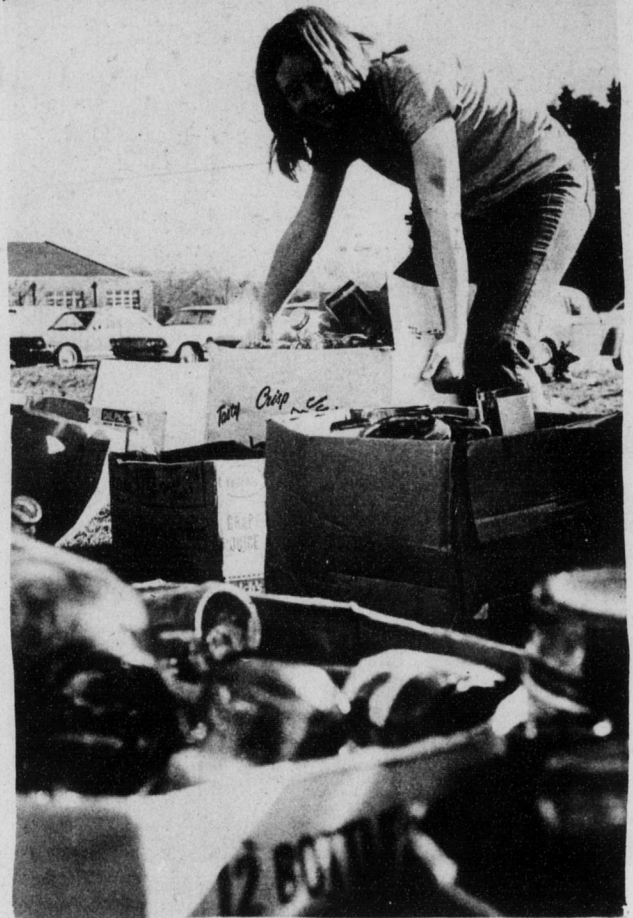
unskilled jobs in bottling companies and retailing outfits.

In the aftermath of Oregon's bold step, almost every state in the country has at least given consideration to such legislation, in addition to several communities. Only a handful, however, have enacted anything. Congress was presented with the opportunity to take up the idea when Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield introduced a bill modeled after the Oregon law last year. But since then, the bill has been stuck in committee, surfacing briefly during two days of hearings last May, and then resubmerging, with some speculation that it may finally come out as a last-minute to other solid waste management.

Metropolitan Washington D.C., has a number of obstacles unlike other sections of the country which have yet to test a bottle bill. For one thing, enactment of the bill would make Washington D.C. the first major metropolitan area in the nation to do so. Many opponents of the bill have argued that it's one thing for a relatively rural state such as Oregon or Vermont which already has a significant number of returnables on the market to make the shift to a completely returnable system. It's something else again for a major eastern city, in which returnables are in very low supply, to do the same thing. Containers average 15 returns per bottle in Oregon but only 4 or 5 in the large eastern cities.

Washington, D.C. and its neighboring counties offer a good illustration of the need for cross-jurisdictional coordination to make the legislation work. Although the population of the District is less than 800,000, the total metropolitan population approaches 3,000,000. If consumers can cross jurisdictional lines to obtain throwaways, the effect of the legislation will be undermined. In Washington many followers of the bill predict that its effective implementation will depend on the adjoining counties also adopting the ordinance.

Finally, as elsewhere in the nation, inflation and high prices are becoming overriding issues. Studies by local environmental groups of liquor and grocery stores in the District show that cases of



Biophile Club member gathers bottles to be recycled.

beer in returnables are an average 81 cents cheaper than the same beverage in cases of nonreturnable and 79 cents cheaper for cases of soft drinks. But the proliferation of the nonreturnable has resulted in a very limited supply of returnables in only a small percentage of the city's stores. So at a time when consumers are especially cognizant of spiraling prices, environmentalists are stressing more than just waste reduction and energy savings if a mandatory return to returnables is instituted. They also are

talking about increasing consumer choice and bringing down prices.

In the end, the issue, stripped of all its political and economic ramifications boils down to two questions: Who is responsible for the nation's wastes - the industries which manufacture disposable convenience products or the people who use them? And, regardless of who is the cause, can the nation's consumer habits and manufacturing trends be turned back 15 years?

## Women's Art Week

The Guilford College Women's Center is sponsoring a Women's Week of Art, speakers, workshops, film and music from January 26 to February 1.

To date the schedule includes: an art show lasting all week in the library, a discussion on *Being Gay* on January 29 at 10:00 a.m., a workshop conducted by Roxy Hobson at 1:00 a.m. entitled *Where are We Going Now* and a display of literature, all located in the Fine Arts Room of the Library. Also, a film will be shown at 8:00 p.m. in the Leak Room entitled *The Best of the New York Women's Film Festival* on the same night as the workshop.

Other events and dates will be announced later this week.

Any women who are interested in displaying their art work should contact either Gayle Henderson or Adele Payne in Hobbs, Leslie Zeldin in Shore or Jeanne Ye in Binford. All art work must be labeled with name and any other pertinent information and brought either to the library or the people listed above by January 25.

