

## POLITICS

# Could this be the year of a bottle bill in RI? Survey shows strong support.



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## Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- A new poll shows that a majority of Rhode Islanders support a "bottle bill" that would create a redemption program for beverage containers.
  - Supporters of the bill cite the potential for reduced litter and increased recycling rates, while opponents argue it would act as an additional tax on consumers.
  - A special commission is currently working on a final report and recommendations for the bill, with plans to introduce legislation in the House soon.
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PROVIDENCE – More than half of Rhode Islanders support the passage of a [bottle bill](#), while less than a third oppose it, according to a new poll.

The survey, commissioned by Save The Bay, asked 400 registered voters their opinions about the state's recycling system and a proposal to create a redemption program for beverage containers.

When given a basic description of the proposal to require a refundable 10-cent deposit on all purchases of drinks in bottles, cans, plastics and other recyclable materials, 55% of respondents said they were in support while 36% said they were opposed.

After they were given a summary of arguments for and against the program, support climbed to 58% and opposition dropped to 31%, according to the survey conducted by the Mellman Group in February.

In its summary of the argument in support, the survey cited the long history of bottle bills in other states, which have seen big reductions in litter and much better recycling rates. On the other side of the issue, the survey said that opponents call the bottle deposit a tax because it would be hard to redeem for some and would raise the price of a 12-pack of soda by \$1.20.

Jed Thorp, director of advocacy for Save The Bay, believes the results demonstrate a clear mandate in support of a redemption program for beverage containers and bolster efforts to pass legislation this General Assembly session that would create one.

“Even when presented with the strongest messages on both sides, people still supported it pretty heavily,” he said.

## **Could this finally be the year of a bottle bill for RI?**

The extent of that support among lawmakers will be determined in the coming weeks.

A special commission on plastic bottle waste created by the legislature in 2023 has been meeting for well over a year, hearing from other states where bottle bills have been heralded as successes and from beverage container manufacturers who support the programs, but there are still divisions among its members.

While environmental advocates and most of the lawmakers who sit on the panel, including the two co-chairs, have expressed strong support for a redemption program,

representatives of the beverage industry in Rhode Island have reservations about how much it would cost to set up and how exactly it would work.

The commission is set to meet on Monday to discuss its final report and start hammering out recommendations. In the meantime, Thorp, who is a member of the commission, is working with others on a bill to be submitted this session.

He says the proposal will attempt to address some of the concerns of beverage companies by following the lead of other states and putting the system in the hands of an independent entity, rather than the state, that could set up free-standing kiosks for the collection of used containers. It's a plan that has the support of some of the biggest manufacturers of drink containers.

Rep. Carol McEntee, the South Kingstown Democrat who is one of the commission co-chairs, said that when it's ready, she plans to introduce the legislation in the House. She and other supporters of the bill have been meeting with House and Senate leadership in recent weeks to try and win their backing.

In a joint statement, House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi and Senate President Dominick Ruggerio acknowledged the meetings with stakeholders but said that "nothing is finalized at this point."

"On Monday, we expect the commission to issue its report and findings, and we look forward to reviewing their recommendations."

Said McEntee, "I'm hopeful, but I know it's going to be a heavy lift."

## **Evidence shows that bottle bills can work**

Bottle bills are a form of what's known as extended producer responsibility – a policy that puts the burden on companies to manage the waste their products generate. They work by charging a fee to consumers when they buy a beverage and then refunding them that money when the empty container is returned to be recycled.

Nine of the 10 states with the highest recycling rates in the country have bottle bills, according to The 50 States of Recycling, a nationwide analysis of recycling systems. The recycling rates for the top states range from 39% to 65%. In

contrast, Rhode Island, which ranks 26th in the nation, [has a rate of just 17%](#).

Redemption programs boost recycling by segregating beverage containers from other types of material, making them easier to reuse. For example, because glass bottles that pass through the single-stream recycling system in Rhode Island get mixed with fiber, plastic and other materials, none are recycled. Instead, they're ground up and used as cover on the Central Landfill in Johnston.

However, [in Oregon, which has the most effective redemption program in the nation](#), the recycling rate for glass bottles is 51%. The Oregon program, which is run by an independent nonprofit, and the program in Maine, which works with a private company, have been cited as possible models for Rhode Island.

## **Aim is not only to boost recycling but also to reduce littering**

McEntee has introduced a bottle bill twice before and both times it's gone nowhere, in large part because of concerns from the beverage and retail industries.

Their concerns range from the burden of trying to manage a redemption program to possible smells emanating from storing used containers on their properties.

More recently, according to Thorp and McEntee, they've brought up issues of equity, saying that all industries that use packaging should be responsible for their waste. It's a reasonable argument and there is talk of expanding the bottle bill into broader legislation that would enact fees on packaging users to raise money for improvements to Rhode Island's recycling system.

"The beverage industry supports well-designed Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) collection policy that promotes the circular economy, but a bottle bill would increase prices for Rhode Islanders at a time when hardworking families and local businesses are already struggling to afford the high cost of living in the state," Peg Sweeney, executive director of the Rhode Island Beverage Association, said in a statement.

McEntee isn't opposed to the idea of crafting legislation that covers other areas of extended producer responsibility as long as the bottle bill portion remains. That's because simply

placing a fee on packaging users doesn't get at the litter problem associated with used bottles and cans, she said.

Placing a 10-cent value on used containers acts as [an incentive for people to pick up litter](#), said Thorp. And while some believe that public awareness campaigns can solve the problem, Thorp said that they don't address accidental litter – think of recycling bins knocked over on a windy day and spilling out their contents – which studies have found accounts for up to half of all litter.

## **Beverage container manufacturers support bill**

Among the supporters of a bottle bill in Rhode Island is the Can Manufacturers Institute, an industry group based in Washington, D.C.

Its clients aim to dramatically increase the recycling rate for aluminum cans, from 45% in 2020 to 90% by 2050. Even getting to an interim target of 70% by the end of this decade will be impossible unless more states set up redemption programs, said Scott Breen, the institute's senior vice president for sustainability.



The programs address a variety of problems with recycling. They get at the contamination issue that plagues single-stream recycling by separating out drink containers. They incentivize people who choose not to recycle by putting a financial value on used containers. Similarly, they give people a reason who buy drinks on the go to recycle the empty containers, rather than toss them into a garbage can or out a window.

“We don’t know any other way to get to our recycling targets,” Breen said.

Sen. Mark McKenney, the other co-chair of the plastic commission, said that testimony heard during its meetings showed that [microplastics pollution](#) and other problems caused by bottle waste are serious problems. He expects the majority of commission members to come out in support of a redemption program and recommend passage of a bottle bill.

“The evidence cries out for us to take action,” the Warwick Democrat said. “It showed that bottle bills, contrary to some opinions out there, do work. For us not to do it, I think would be a serious mistake.”

Even if the legislation gets through the General Assembly, it's still uncertain what Governor McKee would do with it.

Although he's created an anti-litter program for the state, he has yet to voice support for a bottle bill. A spokeswoman said only that McKee would review a bill if it reaches his desk.

Three-quarters of the respondents to the Save The Bay survey expressed concern that Rhode Island's recycling system isn't working. Thorp believes a bottle bill could go a long way to fixing it.

"I'm more confident now that we're ready to get this done and have a bill that everybody can live with," he said.