

As Governor McKee touts litter pickups, advocates say R.I. ‘bottle bill’ would make a real difference

“It wouldn’t be paid for by taxpayers — it would be paid for by the slobs that threw those bottles out in the first place,” said Bill McCusker, president of Friends of the Saugatucket

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 26, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



Elise Torello, who is married to Friends of the Saugatucket president Bill McCusker, sits in a kayak atop the 86,000 miniature bottles collected during the Great Nip Pickup Challenge held over 90 days in 2023 by the Friends of the Saugatucket. COURTESY OF BILL MCCUSKER

PROVIDENCE — Bill McCusker once collected 1,300 tiny booze bottles, known as nips, strewn across the parking lot of a Woonsocket liquor store.

In all, McCusker and other volunteers amassed a mountain of 86,000 miniature bottles during the Great Nip Pickup Challenge, which spanned 90 days in early 2023.

And on Sunday, volunteers picked up 787 pounds of trash off the streets of Wakefield, a village in South Kingstown.

So McCusker, president of Friends of the Saugatucket, sees value in the [Litter-Free Rhode Island](#) program that's being led by Governor Daniel J. McKee and first lady Susan McKee. "It's nice," he said. "It helps pick up what's already there."

But if state officials want to make a significant, long-lasting impact on litter in Rhode Island, they should enact a “bottle bill” requiring a refundable deposit of 10 cents or so on recyclable beverage containers ranging from nips to 3-liter soda bottles, McCusker said Thursday.

“Now you’re giving money to nonprofits and small litter groups, but we need more hands to pick up the litter, and that’s where the bottle bill would provide the incentive,” McCusker said. “It wouldn’t be paid for by taxpayers — it would be paid for by the slobs that threw those bottles out in the first place.”

On Monday, the McKees marked Earth Day by joining state and local officials at a litter pickup in Middletown. The event recognized recipients of a new state microgrant program that boosts local volunteer cleanup efforts and beautification projects.

As part of the 2024 budget, McKee eliminated “a so-called litter tax” on businesses, and said the fees collected weren’t actually go into cleaning up litter. He [instead included \\$100,000](#) in the budget to boost cleanup efforts, and said if all 1 million Rhode Island residents pledged to pick up one piece of litter each day, there’d be 365 million fewer pieces of litter by year’s end.

Since the microgrant program was announced in March, the governor’s office and the Department of Environmental Management have awarded grants to about 70 groups, most of which have requested the full \$750 limit.

“Especially on Earth Day, our actions should speak louder than our words,” McKee said in a statement Monday. “We are excited to see how many community groups statewide have sought and obtained microgrants, and we encourage all Rhode Islanders to take the pledge and commit to keeping Rhody litter-free!”

McCusker said his group received \$700 from the microgrant program to buy orange safety shirts for volunteers, trash bags, and refreshments.

But he said a bottle bill would provide a financial incentive for more people to help pick up the nips and other bottles that still litter the state. A 5-gallon bucket holds about 200 nips, and that could provide \$20 for someone to buy groceries, gas, or to meet other expenses, he said.

State legislators have been proposing a bottle bill for years now, to no avail.

Last year, Representative Carol Hagan McEntee, a South Kingstown Democrat, introduced a bottle bill. It went nowhere. But the House and Senate formed a joint study commission, and McEntee vowed that it would produce a bill and not be a way to bury the idea.

The study commission — which has the [Brobdingnagian](#) title of the Special Joint Legislative Commission to Study and Provide Recommendations to Protect Our Environment and Natural Resources from Plastic Bottle Waste — is [scheduled to meet](#) at 3 p.m. Monday in the House Lounge at the State House.

McEntee noted the commission includes representatives of environmental groups, the Rhode Island Beverage Association, Rhode Island Food Dealers, and Rhode Island Alcohol Beverage Distributors. She said the goal is to reach a consensus on the best way forward. While no bill has been introduced during this year's legislative session, that is the goal, she said.

A total of [10 states have bottle bills](#), including Massachusetts and Connecticut. "We are surrounded by states that have bottle bills," McEntee said. "We don't have one, and we are the smallest state."

In January, Connecticut raised the deposit on eligible bottles and cans to 10 cents, while Massachusetts remains at 5 cents per can. McEntee said Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts should have the same rate of 10 cents per can.

While some critics consider the bottle bill a form of taxation, she said, “It’s not a tax because you get the money back. That, to me, is not a tax. That is fake news.”

McEntee noted she is chairwoman of the [House Small Business Committee](#), and said, “I certainly don’t want to hurt Rhode Island businesses, but at the same time I want to protect the environment, and it think it’s time.”

If the government wants litter picked up, it must do more than it is doing now, she said.

“It’s not enough. It’s definitely not enough,” McEntee said. “I’m in agreement we should reduce the litter, but the real way to get actual reduction is a bottle bill. If it’s bottles that you can bring to a store or redemption center and get 10 cents there, people who will do that.”

Plus, the problem extends beyond litter, she said, noting that plastic waste makes its way into the ocean, microplastics have been [found in Narragansett Bay](#), and tiny bits of plastic have been [found in bottled water](#).

At Monday’s study commission meeting, Bridget O’Brien, chief operating officer of [CLYNK](#), a Maine-based plastic recycler, will detail CLYNK’s operations in Maine, Iowa, New York, and Oregon. She will also provide details on the company’s patented plastic recycling technology and how it assists states with bottle bills.

McEntee said the CLYNK system involves placing bottles in green recyclable bags that have personalized tags. People can drop the bags at redemption centers and have the bottle deposits refunded to their accounts.

Jed Thorp, state director of Clean Water Action Rhode Island, said advocates support the state program to increase litter pickups and education.

“I think the Governor and the First Lady are sincere in trying to help the litter problem,” he said. “But is that going to help with the litter problem as much as the bottle bill?”

Probably not. If you are looking for the biggest bang for the buck, a bottle bill system is going to have much more of an impact than having people take a litter pledge.”

Thorp noted that Save the Bay issued a coastal cleanup report in 2023, which said 2,830 volunteers picked up 22,480 pounds of trash. For the first time, the report found, plastic and foam accounted for more of the trash than cigarette butts.

“Despite our best efforts, the problem does not seem to be getting any better,” Thorp said. “To me, it’s been pretty clear up to this point that the bottle bill is the single most effective thing we could do to prevent litter and promote recycling.”

Thomas Papa, executive director of the Rhode Island Beverage Association, said local beverage companies back “well-designed Extended Producer Responsibility programs that effectively recover recyclable materials — including our bottles and cans — so they can be remade into new ones.”

The group’s experience “shows that any successful collection system must be convenient to consumers, privately run with appropriate government oversight, and include protections that keep financial resources in the system to ensure its long-term viability — and not go to other government spending. This is the better path forward,” he said.

On Thursday, McKee press secretary Olivia DaRocha said, “If a bill is introduced on this topic, we will review whatever version reaches the Governor’s desk.”

Edward Fitzpatrick can be reached at edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com. Follow him [@FitzProv](#).

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