

Bochniak: Mich. could recycle more

Comprehensive effort required for 21st century

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Earth Day 2010 finds Michigan struggling mightily to achieve even average performance on one of the simplest, yet most effective actions citizens can take to improve the environment: recycling.

Michigan badly trails other Great Lakes states and the rest of the country in recycling re-usable wastes.

It isn't that Michigan residents prefer being wasteful or enjoy filling landfills. For most households, there simply is no convenient alternative. A Michigan R recycling Partnership study found that only 37 percent of Michigan residents have access to curbside recycling, the lowest in the Great Lakes region.

Most Michigan residents don't even realize the state performs so poorly when it comes to recycling. We tend to look back fondly at the landmark 1976 "bottle bill" requiring deposits on cans and bottles and assume the problem was solved long ago. In fact, nearly 34 years after Michigan voters adopted the bottle bill, the law continues to do a good job of curbing beverage-container litter, but not much to improve overall recycling.

Michigan's recycling rate for municipal solid waste is about 20 percent, while the five neighboring Great Lakes states recycle an average of 30 percent of wastes - and none of them has a bottle deposit law. (The national recycling rate is about 33 percent.)

It's time to move beyond the 1970s thinking of the bottle bill and consider a broader solution that more accurately addresses Michigan's current waste problems - comprehensive recycling.

Comprehensive recycling would include convenient curbside recycling programs and local drop-off stations for a variety of materials. It would include aluminum, paper, glass bottles and plastic containers that now mostly are spilled into landfills and incinerators.

An overwhelming number of Michigan residents -- 81 percent -- support a comprehensive, statewide program to make it easier to recycle a whole range of household waste, according to an April 2009 poll. The statewide telephone poll, conducted by Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group, found 57 percent strongly favored comprehensive recycling and 24 percent "somewhat" favored it.

Comprehensive recycling would also offer Michigan new business and employment opportunities. Recycling already accounts for some 164,000 jobs in the state, with a payroll of about \$4.8 billion. Raising the recycling rate to the average of other Great Lakes states would add as many as 13,000 jobs and \$1.8 billion to \$3.9 billion in business revenues, according to a recent report by Public Sector Consultants of Lansing.

And comprehensive recycling offers environmental benefits that go beyond the obvious. The latest Public Sector Consultants report found Michigan could cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 2.2 million metric tons annually - the equivalent of eliminating 400,000 cars from the state's roads - simply by upping its recycling rate to match the Great Lakes state average.

Michigan can - and should - do better with all recyclable goods. Comprehensive recycling is the way to do it.

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