

A NEW TWIST TO AN OLD BOTTLE BATTLE

On April 21 the Michigan Resource Recovery Commission, the state's newest commission, is expected to hear testimony and vote on a resolution supporting returnable bottle legislation. But to the surprise of many state environmentalists, who will be watching the vote closely, the resolution may fail.

In the closing days of the 1974 state legislative session, the Resource Recovery Commission was formed within the Department of Natural Resources. The Commission's purpose is to advise the Natural Resources Commission on matters of solid waste policy and to oversee the administration of the state's solid waste program. The Commission consists of 11 members: 9 appointed by the Governor, one member representing the Director of the DNR and one member representing the State Treasurer. Ecology Center staff member Thomas Blessing is one of the initial appointees to the Commission.

Since the first meeting in September 1975, the Commission has worked on organizational procedures and on revising a state solid waste policy statement proposed by the Natural Resources Commission in 1974. Unfortunately, the most significant action taken by the Resource Recovery Commission thus far is its failure to include a statement on the use of returnable bottles within the final draft of this policy statement. By a 4-4 vote the Commission failed to adopt a motion by Commissioner Blessing to include support of returnable legislation in the statement. Some Commissioners felt that a statement concerning such a specific issue was not appropriate to a policy statement.

In an effort to force the Commission to take a stand on the returnable bottle issue, Commissioner Blessing drafted a resolution independent of the policy statement and introduced it at the March meeting. According to Blessing it would be "unthinkable for the Governor's new Commission on solid waste not to support the use of returnable bottles." The resolution cites environmental and economic benefits for the state and recommends "prompt and favorable consideration" of returnable legislation by the Michigan legislature.

Opposition to the resolution was immediate and intense. One Commissioner has already been swayed by heavy manufacturer lobbying claiming that jobs will be lost and that the Michigan beverage industry hurt if bottle legislation is passed. The lobby states that better ways exist for dealing with the solid waste, litter and economic problems brought on by the throw-away container. Multi-million dollar resource recovery facilities to recover the metal cans, and anti-litter campaigns to prosecute violators are their answers.

Responding to industry claims, Commissioner Blessing points out, "it is pointless to expend money to separate materials from solid waste that shouldn't be there in the first place. Anti-litter campaigns do not reach the people causing the litter problem. And on the economics, Michigan bottlers have seen a steady decline in market share due to the inflow of one-way containers from out-of-state manufacturers. There is absolutely no question in my mind that returnable legislation will help the Michigan environment and economy."

Returnable legislation has repeatedly been rebuffed by the state legislature in spite of public support. A recent poll showed 73.3 % of Michigan residents support returnable legislation. Governor Milliken has said directly in his 1975 State of the State message, "I favor moving toward elimination of non-returnable bottles and cans, a step that would have favorable benefit for the environment, toward energy conservation and ultimately for the consumer." At the time this article was written the Resource Recovery Commission vote had not yet been taken. The Ecology Center will watch the vote closely to see if this new Commission will be responsive to the expressed priorities of the Governor and the people of the state.