

Past, Present, Future: Washington State Bottle Bill

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My original Action Plan that I created in Costa Rica was to improve environmental awareness and sustainability at Redmond High School in Redmond, WA. However, when I returned from Costa Rica, I realized that my high school has had an award winning environmental science program for a number of years, and had already adopted many of the proposals in my Action Plan (a good problem to have, but I still wanted to complete an environmental Action Plan that would impact my community or even my state.) Redmond High School helped create the “Cool School” Challenge program in 2006, and has established environmentally friendly policies such as powering down computers when not in use, taking time to sort recyclables in the school cafeteria, encouraging carpooling and using efficient lighting. Because of this, I decided to have a broader focus: the environmental issues in Washington State.

Besides my interest in the environment, I am also an athlete. After almost every basketball game or soccer match, it has bothered me to see plastic bottles lying around. While vacationing in Maine this summer, I noticed that Maine did not have plastic water bottles and aluminum cans strewn everywhere. I researched this a little more and discovered that Maine has a mandatory 5-cent deposit on every bottle or can, which is refunded when the can or bottle is recycled. The 5-cent deposit provides incentive for people to return their cans and bottles, and if they don't, someone else will pick them up and return them- this keeps the streets and playing fields free of bottle and can garbage. Bottle bills prevent litter, promote recycling, improve the environment and create jobs. Currently, only 10 states have bottle bills, but in those states, deposit laws significantly reduce container litter AND other types of litter. Following the implementation of bottle bills in various states, container litter has been reduced by 69 to 84 percent (including in New York), while total litter has been reduced by 34-64 percent. Curbside recycling is not enough. Because there is no financial incentive to recycle, participation rates are much lower with curbside programs than with deposit programs. Finally, curbside recycling is funded by government and taxpayers while deposit systems are funded by producers and consumers.

The next step I took was to figure out Washington State's history with bottle bill legislation. In 1970, shortly after Oregon adopted their bottle bill legislation, similar legislation was introduced in Washington, but rejected by a slim majority, 51%. In 1979, deposit legislation was introduced again, and rejected by 57% of registered Washington voters. Finally, in 1982, deposit legislation was introduced as Ballot Initiative 414 and defeated by 70% of voters. After that, the bottle bill had no activity until 2011, when four Washington State Senators introduced legislation to create a deposit system in Washington, requiring dealers/distributors responsible for initiating the 5¢ deposit, picking up empty containers, and reimbursing retailers and redemption centers. This bill was referred to a committee in 2011 and nothing has happened since that time.

Washington is one of 24 states and jurisdictions that permit direct Citizen's Initiatives to be placed on the ballot for voters. If an initiative wins a majority of the votes cast, it becomes law in the state (or locality) without any other legislative action required. Based on the success of bottle bills in other states, I decided for my Action Plan that I would draft an Initiative and lead a petition drive to obtain enough signatures to get a bottle bill placed on the statewide ballot in November 2014.

I have researched the history of bottle bills in Washington State, and the rules surrounding citizen's initiatives. I have a draft initiative, based on the 2011 draft legislation, and I am developing a detailed work plan to collect enough voter signatures on a petition to get a bottle bill on the Washington Statewide ballot in November 2014. Washington state law permits citizens initiatives if they are (1) introduced and sponsored by a Washington state voter, and (2) supported by enough signatures of registered Washington State voters.

An Initiative to the People ("direct initiative") must have obtained enough signatures at least four months before the election, so I would need to obtain enough signatures by July 1, 2014. In order to get the Initiative on the November 2014 ballot, I will need 246,372 signatures of registered voters, representing 8% of the votes cast for the office of governor in the last election. The initial filing can be made no earlier than February 2014, and collection of signatures can begin once the Initiative is filed.

During the research phase I have been working alone, however I am now at the point where involving more people should greatly benefit the progress of this action plan. One of the great resources I found online to help with research is the Bottle Bill Toolkit, <http://toolkit.bottlebill.org/>. The toolkit provides a great deal of assistance in developing a bottle bill strategy.

Next steps include finding a sponsor, filing the Initiative, and contacting groups to help me with the petition drive. Attachment C is a draft PowerPoint that I will use to enlist people and groups to help. I still need to find a sponsor for my Citizen's Initiative, because I am only 17 and cannot yet be a registered voter. I plan to reach out to local environmental groups to see if they will sponsor the legislation. Attachment A to this report are copies of letters that I will send to some local environmental groups, including Mountains to Sound Greenway, the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle, and the Center for Environmental Law and Policy. Once I have found a sponsor, I can begin the Initial Filing process outlined in Attachment B which must be completed before collecting signatures. I plan to work with Redmond's Environmental Club to help drive signatures at my school (since many seniors are 18 and registered voters), as well as reach out to and collaborate with the environmental clubs of other High Schools in Washington State, and other organizations.

A major obstacle I ran into is that I am not 18, so I cannot sponsor a citizen's initiative. This is not as much of an obstacle as I thought because I just need to find a registered voter or environmental group that will agree to be my sponsor. It will be very challenging to collect almost 250,000 signatures with a time constraint of five months. However, like I learned in basketball, you miss every shot you don't take.

I have always loved science, whether during school or just when exploring on my own. However, I do not have much experience with politics, so creating this action plan has given me a bit of insight into the political arena. I now realize how challenging it can be to get legislation passed. But I have also realized how important democracy is for citizens to have a voice and role. The fact that I, as a 17 year old, have the opportunity to make a difference at such a high level truly amazes me. I learned that I am not afraid to take on big tasks and I am definitely not afraid of failure. If the Initiative succeeds, I will have

accomplished a lot for the state of Washington; if the Initiative fails, I will still have learned a lot about participatory democracy, and I will have raised awareness of an environmental issue that can and should be addressed.

In the process of developing this project, I have utilized organizing and planning skills and I have begun to plan for the public speaking skills that will be required. Completing the BELL program gave me substantive knowledge about environmental issues, as well as given me confidence expressing my ideas and opinions.

If I had any advice for BELL students, it would be that they start working on their Action Plans as soon as they return, and make progress during summer break. It's very challenging to try to work on plans once school starts. Even if their first ideas falls through, talk with peers or teachers to help come up with a new plan because there are plenty of problems and challenges in the world to be addressed. I would also encourage that they enlist others to help early in the process; I have been working on this alone, and I believe I would have made more progress had I reached out to environmental groups earlier in the process.

This project has inspired the interest of my family and friends who I have spoken to about this issue during the past year. I will definitely be spreading the word about this issue to more people during the school year, and I hope it will grab their interest as well. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had in Costa Rica and I am glad that I am able to bring back to my community some of what I learned on my adventure.