

MARYLAND VOICES

EDITORIALS

If Maryland had a dime for every wasted plastic bottle ...

Baltimore's Trash Wheel Family — Mr. Trash Wheel, Professor Trash Wheel, Captain Trash Wheel and Gwynnda the Good Wheel of the West — have certainly kept busy in a decade's time scooping up trash that might otherwise be headed down the Patapsco River and into the Chesapeake Bay. Their efforts have hauled in no less than 2,362 tons of trash and one of the single largest components, the Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore reports, is an ordinary household item you might be holding in your hand right now: a plastic bottle. More than 1.8 million of them have been collected over those 10 years.

Why do so many plastic bottles end up in the water? The simple answer is that they get tossed in the street and then swept away after a heavy rain. The better question is: How can we make it stop? Weekly recycling collections are great, but they don't do much good if people don't make an effort. Outreach and education campaigns are welcome. They probably convince some people to do the right thing. But what if there was a way to motivate a lot more people to be a lot more careful where they leave their empties?

It's time for Maryland to get serious about imposing a deposit on plastic bottles. Experts warn that only about one-quarter of plastic bottles are getting recycled in Maryland. The impact of this is beyond unsightly litter. Plastics are not only filling landfills but they contain toxics that leak out into the environment, breaking down into microplastics that can harm wildlife and human health. Scientists estimate it can take a thousand years for them to decompose. Require a deposit on them when you buy a soda, perhaps, or a gallon of milk or anything else that comes in a plastic bottle — perhaps 5 cents or 10 cents — and you have greatly incentivized recycling. At least 10 states have taken this approach including New York and California.

Recently, advocates for what's known as the "Bottle Bill" rallied in Baltimore for a 10-cent refundable deposit on beverage bottles and cans. Critics complain it's burdensome and bureaucratic but



Workers help Mr. Trash Wheel ingest a buffet of flotsam near Harbor East that washed down the Jones Falls following heavy rains. **FILE.**

such strong actions also work.

A ban on plastic bags has done wonders for reducing that item of trash. Deposits on bottles could raise the recycling rate to 90% or more. Still, the recycling bill offered during the last legislative session never made it out of a state Senate committee despite support from Senate President Bill Ferguson who represents much of Baltimore's waterfront.

Perhaps members of the Maryland General Assembly will take firmer action in the 2025 session which begins Jan. 8. If Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President-elect Donald Trump's choice to run the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, can speak out against the harms of microplastics in food, water and the environment as he's so often done in the past, the Democrats in Annapolis should be able to take meaningful action on that front, too.