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MIRA exec hopes message on a billboard will push bottle return change

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- The Midwest Independent Retailers Association is hoping to convince business and political leaders that Michigan's bottle return law needs an update.
- The association is using a billboard to catch the eyes of those who traveled to Mackinac Island May 26-29 for an annual policy conference.

MACKINAC ISLAND – If a picture is worth a thousand words, what about a billboard popping out along a scenic interstate highway dotted by little else than trees or maybe another billboard or two?

Bill Wild, president and CEO of the Midwest Independent Retailers Association (MIRA), is about to find out.

His business organization just posted a new billboard with its “Recycle the Bottle Bill” message along Interstate 75 in northern Michigan.

The organization is hoping to convince business and political leaders (about 1,500 influencers in all) using that roadway to get to the Detroit Regional Chamber’s Policy Conference (May 26-29) on Mackinac Island to support the idea of adjusting the state’s 50-year-old bottle recycling law, which MIRA says would take the burden off grocers, retailers and small businesses where much of the recycling is taking place.

MIRA is in favor of recycling bottles but argues there has to be a better way.

Wild borrowed the marketing idea to use billboards along I-75 during the annual conference (organized by the Detroit Regional Chamber) from Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, who has posted billboards with messaging about his county since 2011.

Critics of the bottle bill, adopted in 1976, say while it was needed initially to clean up the roadways and for the state to become a national leader in recycling, the process for recycling needs to be adjusted to keep up with changing times.

“Michigan’s grocery and convenience stores were never built to be de facto recycling centers and have wanted this dirty, expensive process out of their stores for decades,” Wild told me.

“Because the state is about to elect a new governor and vote on all statewide legislative seats, MIRA feels now is the operative time to educate candidates and legislators on rapidly declining consumer participation rates and the challenges retailers face under the current system — especially dirty containers in our food stores,” added Wild, who has been beating the drum to change the law for a few years.

Andrew Doud, owner of Doud’s Market on Mackinac Island, a MIRA member, is among the 1,000 retailers represented in Michigan by the business organization. Doud’s, established in 1884 (<https://www.doudsmarket.com/>), is believed to be one of America's oldest grocery stores, and is the only store on the island that accepts returnables.

“For so many small, 'tweener' stores like us across Michigan, it’s a huge burden because we are taking on more cans than we actually sell,” Doud told me. “And we are paying for employee labor to process it, maintenance of the machines and the return area, and the lost floor space we cannot use to serve our customers.”

A "tweener" is a store 10 or more miles from other stores that accept returnables. “Additionally, the cost of the machines is unreal. A machine costs approximately \$40,000 and service fees of \$600 per month,” Doud added. “What was intended to solve problems back in 1976 no longer works today. Moving recycling out of grocery stores is a starting point for modernizing recycling to meet consumer needs in 2026.”

Wild mentioned a University of Michigan study by its Center for Sustainable Systems that analyzed the state's 10-cent bottle deposit law. It found bottle return rates dropped from 95% some years ago to 70% in 2024. The study also recommended changes to the law, including updating the system through universal redemption sites. Wild said the pandemic was a game changer on this issue.

“For MIRA and our members, it was COVID ... which magnified the risk of bringing dirty, contaminated bottles and cans into the same environment where we are selling fresh produce, meats and other food items. Think of all the work that was done prior to the food arriving in the grocery stores to safeguard it from contaminants and ensure that it is safe for consumers.” He explained the “Recycle the Bottle” effort is aiming to bring stakeholders to the table to hear input on the best ways to move to a curbside/drop-off center program.

Wild said their billboard will stay up for at least a month to capture attendees of the conference held the last week in May and for the public, too, to see as traffic on the roadway increases now that the summer tourism season has kicked off. Getting the messages out.

Meanwhile, the king of the billboard messaging campaigns — Hackel — is at it again. He tripled down for this year's conference with two billboards posted along the interstate driving up to the island, and another for those heading back down I-75. The latest billboards show a smiling Hackel — one touting his county's AAA Bond rating, a second with the message “Macomb Means Business” and a third with his image and the message “Macomb With Everybody” — talking up civility and working together to get things done across the region and state.

When Hackel took over as county executive — its first ever — he wanted to introduce his municipality in a unique way to conference-goers and put up a billboard just before the Mackinac Bridge with the tagline “Make Macomb Your Home.” It gained buzz, which is why he has continued to do so each year. And it has led to others from business and politics since then to follow his lead to help get their message out.

That includes former Detroit mayor and former independent gubernatorial candidate Mike Duggan. He posted three billboards on I-75 before the Mackinac Bridge this time with his smiling face and various campaign messages. Duggan decided last week to end his candidacy amid changing consumer and voter concerns tied to the war in Iran, gas prices, the economy and Donald Trump, leaving a path to victory for an independent next to impossible.

Duggan, who helped kick off the policy conference Tuesday, May 26, said onstage that he wasn't interested in running for office again. Which means his billboards could wind up as collectables.

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Disclaimer: MIRA and its members support recycling and environmental responsibility. Our goal is to modernize Michigan's bottle return system by moving the collection process out of grocery stores and into a more efficient model. We welcome your feedback and input on this important issue.