

Reinvigorating Recycling

By Senator Bob Smith

Thank you to everyone who voted for Ballot Question No. 2, the success of which has given the State of New Jersey the ability to fund a groundbreaking program that will significantly reduce the harmful diesel particulates emitted into our air. As we move into the New Year and begin a new administration in Trenton, I hope you will join me in ensuring that New Jersey remains at the forefront when it comes to protecting our environment.

In 1987, New Jersey was the first state in the nation to enact a law that mandated recycling. For a decade, New Jersey was considered a national and world leader in recycling. Garden State citizens took great pride in their efforts to recycle.

Unfortunately, there has been a significant decline in New Jersey's recycling rates since 1997, when 61 percent of all solid waste was recycled. In 2003, the rate was a low 33 percent, according to the Department of Environmental Protection. We cannot afford to continue to allow these rates to plummet.

Recycling reduces harmful pollutants in our air and water, while simultaneously conserving our natural resources. In 2003, New Jersey residents and businesses recycled 600,000 tons of ferrous metals, which had the effect of saving 3 million tons of natural resources, which would have otherwise been used to produce new steel. In the same year, 650,000 tons of paper was recycled in New Jersey, saving more than 9 million trees. Recycling reduced the air emissions and water pollutant discharges by approximately 150,000 tons. We saved the equivalent of 700 million gallons of gasoline thanks to recycling. And that was in 2003 with a low recycling rate of 33 percent. Imagine what we could do if we recycled at a higher rate!

In addition to the vital environmental and energy benefits of recycling, there are strong economic reasons for reinvigorating recycling: More than 2,000 businesses and 27,000 private sector jobs exist due to recycling. The DEP estimated that 7,000 more jobs can be added if we can increase our efforts to recycle half of all solid waste produced in New Jersey.

The Legislature is considering a package of three bills that will help to reinvigorate recycling in the Garden State. The legislation will address the recycling tax, plastics and electronics.

The recycling tax, which funded recycling programs, enforcement of recycling laws and public education about recycling, expired in 1996. Statewide, we have just \$3.5 million available for recycling grants to municipalities. Senate Bill No. 2651 would reinstate the recycling tax and guarantee \$18 million annually. The revenues would fund recycling programs at the county and municipal levels through grants. The funds would train county and municipal recycling coordinators and pay for a re-education program for New Jerseyans about the importance of recycling. While the recycling tax would cost the average homeowner a total of \$3.00 per year, the savings associated with keeping landfill disposal fees as low as possible more than offsets this cost.

Senate Bill No. 2578 would strengthen the recycling of plastics, the use of which has increased significantly our state's manufacturing sector. The active recycling of plastics saves an average of 1.5 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions that would otherwise pollute our air and contribute to global warming.

The final piece of the puzzle, Senate Bill No. 1861, would create a program to recycle electronics. The DEP estimates that 2.4 million computers and monitors, and 600,000 televisions become obsolete each year in New Jersey. The disposal of electronics in landfills means toxic chemicals including lead, mercury, nickel and zinc are released into the environment. The legislation would create an environmentally sound method of disposing of electronics.

When New Jersey's recycling program was at its peak, school children and adults alike recited the mantra: "renew, reuse, recycle." Let's bring that back, because only with vigilance will the environment be left protected for future generations.