

Keep America Beautiful:

A History

In the aftermath of magazine ads promoting beverage cans as "throwaways", Keep America Beautiful (KAB) was founded in 1953 by a group of businessmen from the beverage and packaging industries. Their purported interest was to curb the growing problem of litter. Coincidentally, 1953 was the year Vermont passed the nation's first bottle bill, banning the sale of beer in non-refillable bottles.

Litter was a visible problem nationwide and the bottlers and packagers were concerned that government would make them responsible for solving the litter problem by regulating their industries. That concern was the catalyst for founding KAB. The organization launched its first campaign theme, "Every Litter Bit Hurts" and the most visible environmental organizations joined KAB's war on litter.

"People start pollution"

In the early 1970's KAB mounted a splashy new campaign aimed at making individuals responsible for cleaning up litter that was a blight on parks, playgrounds, country roads and city landscapes. The now legendary image of the Native American with a tear angling down his face caught the attention of the public, but many environmental organizations serving as advisors to KAB were offended by the "People Start Pollution, People Can Stop It" theme.

Environmentalists thought the theme implied that individuals were solely responsible for pollution. Environmental

organizations including the Sierra Club, National Audubon Society and National Wildlife Federation wanted KAB to join them in working for strategies such as bottle bills, that focused on preventing litter and making producers responsible for their packaging waste. But the industry backers of the KAB strongly objected.

KAB publicly opposes bottle bills

In 1972 Oregon and Vermont enacted the nation's first bottle bills requiring a 5-cent deposit on beer and soft drink containers. By 1974, when the California legislature began to debate whether to enact a container deposit law, KAB made a strategic decision to publicly oppose the bottle bill. Roger Powers, President of KAB testified against the California bottle bill before the state legislature in Sacramento.

Some Advisory Committee members saw this public opposition to bottle bills as an indication that KAB was serving its own interests and not those of the broader environmental community and as a result threatened to quit the advisory board. In order to keep the environmentalists on board KAB, agreed that it would not take a position, either for or against deposit legislation.

As public support for bottle bills grew and aggressive bottle bill campaigns were waged in Maine and Michigan, the brewers needed an alternative response to litter, otherwise more states might soon adopt bottle bills. In 1975 the U.S. Brewers Association (USBA) developed a sophisticated campaign called the "Clean Community System" (CCS), which they touted as an alternative to bottle bills. As the parent organization, KAB kicked off the new Clean Community Campaign at its annual meeting in 1975.

In a memo several months later, the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Thomas Williams explained the underlying purpose of the CCS. It is a public relations campaign, he wrote, used by the industry " in an attempt to focus the attention of hundreds of communities on anti-litter campaigns . . . When successfully inaugurated, it tends to abort any local efforts to institute beverage container deposit systems, placing emphasis on street-cleaning and other litter control activities."

The final blow to environmentalists was dealt during a speech at a July 1976 KAB Board of Directors meeting at the Biltmore Hotel in New York, when American Can Company chairman William F. May labeled bottle bill proponents "Communists" and called for a total KAB mobilization against the four bottle bill referenda on the ballot in November. Present during the speech were KAB's Advisory Committee members, many of whom were the subject of May's attack.

The story was picked up by Jack Anderson and aired on his national television show. On August 12, 1976, the EPA resigned from KAB's board and by October 1976 more than a dozen environmental and citizen groups, including National Audubon Society, National Wildlife

Federation, League of Women Voters and Sierra Club disaffiliated from KAB. In November of that year voters approved bottle bills in Michigan and Maine.

KAB proposes ineffective bottle bill alternatives

Industry opponents of deposit legislation recognized that simply 'opposing' legislation was not enough. Since 1976 hundreds of CCS and similar KAB programs have been proposed in cities and counties across the U.S. as a direct alternative to local container deposit ordinances. Funding, however, has strings attached, as one environmental group in New York discovered. In New York City, the Environmental Action Coalition (EAC) received \$350,000 in support over three years from Pepsi-Cola, the Can Manufacturers Institute and the Aluminum Association for anti-litter education. EAC lost industry funding in 1975 when it endorsed the proposed New York bottle bill.

The most effective *statewide* strategy used to convince legislators that bottle bills are not needed has been litter taxes. These alternatives generally involve a small annual tax on all manufacturers and retailers. The taxes are then used to create a government agency that addresses litter issues. Litter taxes were passed in Colorado, Kentucky, Arkansas, Connecticut, California, Ohio and Virginia as alternatives to bottle bill proposals.

Bob Warrick, farmer and President of the Nebraska chapter of the Sierra Club said of KAB's programs, "I'm tired of pumping money into front organizations whose goal is to educate and plant flowers. My ditch is filled with cans and bottles. Legislation mandating deposits would stop litter before it starts, but KAB never supported a bottle bill."

Warwick's disappointment echoes that of Newark's Mayor, Sharpe James who said of the KAB program, "The Clean Communities alternative to a bottle bill offered by the industry in New Jersey has been a failure."

With increased public interest in recycling and waste reduction in the 1980's, KAB's emphasis shifted from litter cleanups to recycling. KAB's Clean Community Systems grew to more than 400 local groups and its list of financial supporters expanded to include a broader range of manufacturing industries and companies in the waste disposal industry such as Waste Management, Inc and Browning Ferris.

In the 1990's, KAB adopted yet another campaign slogan - "Let's not waste the 1990's" - which stressed the need to encourage citizens, municipal officials and civic leaders to "re-examine recycling's capabilities and limitations." The new campaign presented a 5-pronged solution to solving the problem of solid waste - source reduction, recycling, composting, incineration and sanitary landfilling.

KAB's 1990's slogan was new, but the message had changed little since Iron Eyes Cody warned that "People Start Pollution - People Can Stop It." The

promotional materials made no mention of policies such as recycled content requirements, mandatory recycling rates, bottle bills or other measures that shift the burden of waste management and waste reduction from government to the producers of waste.

KAB alienates other environmental groups

On April 5, 1993 KAB hosted a nationwide videoconference "Recycling Realities: A National Town Meeting." In announcing the conference, KAB President Roger Powers said, "While recycling can be an important method of dealing with our waste in some communities; it is not the only option. In order to safely and effectively manage trash, the public must be informed of every alternative." Powers was of course referring to the waste management options of landfilling and incineration.

More than a dozen environmental and public interest groups, in a letter to KAB President Roger Powers, charged that the panel of waste experts addressing the videoconference was void of representation from the environmental community. The groups wrote, "It is clear that the perspective of your corporate members will be effectively articulated by such panelists as Jane Witheridge of Waste Management, Inc. and Melinda Sweet of Lever Brothers Company. We are dismayed that you have chosen to exclude advocates and experts on successful source reduction and recycling initiatives."

Rick Hind, Executive Director of Greenpeace and one of the co-signers of the letter said, "KAB continues to put the blame for waste generation and the responsibility for waste management on the public sector, when the real polluters are the industries that manufacture, sell, bury and burn the waste."

At least one local KAB organization broke ties with Keep America Beautiful as a result of the videoconference. The board of directors of Arlingtonians for a Clean Environment (ACE) voted to disaffiliate with KAB after ACE director Steve Coffee attended KAB's Recycling Realities Meeting in April 1993. Coffee was dismayed to find no environmental groups on the panel and turned off by what he believed was a deliberate effort on the part of KAB to avoid questions on deposit legislation.

When Powers was asked why no environmental groups were members of KAB, Powers said he had "no idea." "Our members are a good cross-section of the Fortune 500 corporations. They are working on enlightened self-interest. We are helping to educate 495 American communities on what the options are. I don't go hat in hand seeking out environmental groups."

Eighteen months after the videoconference KAB funded a report titled "The Role of Recycling in Integrated Solid Waste Management to the Year 2000". The \$400,000 report concluded, among other things, that "recycling and composting as currently practiced have limits that will be reached in this decade." The study drew fire from recycling advocates and environmentalists who felt that it painted recycling in a negative light, focusing on the limits of curbside recycling and advocating alternative waste management technologies such as landfilling and incineration.

At KAB's annual meeting in December 1994, Mark Lichtenstein, President of the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) told KAB meeting attendees, "After reading the study and talking with many respected leaders in our industry, I find myself asking what exactly is the agenda of the KAB national office? I have to ask. . . can the NRC count on the KAB national to help in our mutual war on waste?"

In an article in *Biocycle*, Former President of NRC and Manager of Market Development for Weyerhaeuser Recycling, Pete Grogan, wrote, "I find myself questioning the agenda behind the study. . . The report reminds us that it is 'cheaper' to send solid waste to the landfill. Well, I can easily argue that tossing solid waste in the river is even cheaper."

In the spring of 2000, Keep Washington Beautiful (KWB) sponsored a cosmetic cleanup in Anacostia, a densely populated community in Washington, DC. Volunteers biked and cleaned

up trash at four predetermined sites. The sites included two parks, an area along the Anacostia River and a mini dump that had grown up beside a short stretch of railroad track. During the four-hour cleanup, volunteers working with members of the newly formed Keep Washington Beautiful -- a KAB clone -- culled tires, miscellaneous litter and lots of beverage containers from the four sites. Beverage containers accounted for fifty per cent of the collected materials.

Keep Washington Beautiful is one of the newest big-city KAB affiliates. Like most other KAB affiliates, KWB grew out of industry opposition to a proposed bottle bill referendum.
