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Inflating the trash tax hurts Michiganians, not Canadians

By Dan Batts / Special to The Detroit News

A politically driven proposal to boost Michigan's trash tax to the nation's highest rate is fraught with emotion, hypocrisy and economic danger for a state that can ill afford it.

Certain state lawmakers want to slap a \$7.50-per-ton tax on trash generated by Michigan families, communities and businesses. Backers wrongly claim this levy would somehow stop the flow of Canadian household waste into Michigan landfills.

Michigan businesses and communities generate more than 70 percent of the waste disposed in the state. Because it's illegal to only tax the Canadians, Michigan taxpayers would pay the lion's share of the estimated \$160 million annual tax.

What is true?

First, Canadian trash is an emotional issue. What Michigan citizen would "support" the shipment of Canadian household waste to our state's landfills? Because it stirs the emotions of Michigan voters, some lawmakers have latched onto the issue to win political favor. Second, about 5 million tons of common household waste from Canada is shipped annually to only a few Michigan landfills for disposal. Here's the rest of the story that the politicians who support the trash tax are not telling you:

- Michigan annually ships more than 100 million pounds of hazardous waste -- stuff that can hurt people and the environment if not properly handled -- to Canada.
- Michigan sends e-scrap (discarded computers and the like) to Canada, Illinois and Ohio for disposal.
- Michigan sends low-level nuclear waste to South Carolina.
- Michigan sends some household waste to Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin for disposal.
- Michigan recycling centers annually ship thousands of tons of discarded newspapers and cardboard containers to Canadian, Mexican and Chinese paper mills.

For more than 20 years, solid waste disposal and processing has been done regionally. Before that, almost every community had a "dump" that was often environmentally unsound.

Garbage tax plan

Proposed legislation in Michigan would:

- Raise the surcharge on trash in Michigan to \$7.50 a ton from 21 cents.
- Return the estimated \$130 million to \$160 million created from the trash surcharge increase to communities for recycling programs or other uses.
- Extend a moratorium on new landfills in Michigan from January 2006 to January 2010.

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Passage of laws in the 1980s forced the closing of hundreds of dumps across Michigan and the development of environmentally safe regional landfills.

This regional approach ensures that high environmental standards are met, disposal costs remain affordable for everyone and investments in facilities are covered.

Here are some other important facts about the issue:

Fact: Toronto is working to end its reliance on Michigan landfills by 2010, already sending 15 percent less waste in 2004 than it did in 2003.

Once the province of Ontario permits new disposal facilities, the flow of Canadian waste to Michigan will fall significantly.

Fact: Michigan landfills are not being flooded with Canadian waste. Only seven of the state's 53 landfills receive Canadian waste.

Fact: Michigan has decades of landfill space. Landfill companies estimate they have more than 50 years of capacity remaining. New waste processing technologies are moving to market that will dramatically increase the capacity of existing landfills without expanding their sizes.

If the trash tax increase would succeed in stopping the flow of Canadian household waste into Michigan, would Canada reciprocate and stop the flow of Michigan's hazardous waste and e-scrap to Canada?

Hopefully, the politicians who support the trash tax have a plan to dispose of Michigan-generated hazardous waste and e-scrap in Macomb County, Kent County, Detroit, Escanaba and wherever else their constituents live.

Dan Batts is the president of the Michigan Waste Industries Association in Lansing. Send letters to The News, Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226, (313) 222-6417 or letters@detnews.com.

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