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What Omahans are doing

In the theater: Metropolitan Utilities District this spring sponsored a free public screening of "Tapped," a movie that decries the bottled-water industry.

Off the shelf: Scheels All Sports in Omaha says that in addition to campers and students buying reusable bottles, parents and senior citizens are, too. Target at Crossroads Mall is selling them in more departments. Look for bottles free of the chemical Bisphenol A, or BPA, which has raised health concerns.

At home: Rena Corcoran of Omaha says she has quit buying cases of bottled water. The 25-year-old drinks only from reusable bottles, and she has purchased them for gift giving.

Near Walden Pond, bottle ban roils waters

THE NEW YORK TIMES

CONCORD, Mass. — Henry David Thoreau was jailed here 164 years ago for refusing to pay taxes while living at Walden Pond. Now the town has Jean Hill to contend with.

Hill, an octogenarian previously best known for her blueberry jam, spoke in April at a town hall meeting, where she proposed banning the sale of bottled water. Residents approved, with the intent of making Concord the first town in the nation to remove water sold under names such as Aquafina and Poland Spring from local stores.

In orchestrating an outright ban, Hill, 82, has achieved something that powerful environmental groups have not even tried.

The bottled water industry is not pleased; it has threatened to sue if the ban takes effect in the town of 17,000 as planned on Jan. 1.

Concord officials have hinted that they might not strictly enforce the ban. But Hill, who described herself as obsessed, said that would only deepen her resolve.

"I'm going to work until I drop on this," she said. "If you believe in something, you have to persist and you have to have a thick skin."

Tom Lauria, a spokesman for the International Bottled Water Association, questioned why Hill would single out bottled water when there are so many other products packaged in plastic.

“Some people in the industry kind of respect her because of her age and her vision,” he said, “but we believe that vision is distorted. There are far worse products to pick on than water.”

Hill’s crusade began a few years ago, when her grandson, then 10, told her about the so-called Pacific garbage patch, a vortex of plastic and other debris floating between California and Hawaii. It is thought to be twice the size of Texas.

She did some research and learned that millions of plastic bottles were disposed of daily and that most were not recycled. Although most opponents of bottled water have sought piecemeal change, such as getting government agencies to stop buying it, Hill wanted her affluent, erudite town to take a bolder step.

“The bottled water companies are draining our aquifers and selling it back to us,” she said, repeating her pitch at the town meeting. “We’re trashing our planet, all because of greed.”

Hill’s presentation compelled residents at the meeting to approve the ban. But days later, town officials said it appeared to be unenforceable. They have asked the State Attorney General’s Office for guidance and expect a response soon.

“It’s our responsibility to carry out the wishes of the town meeting, but we’re struggling a little with how to do that,” said Christopher Whelan, the town manager. “It’s still up in the air what will happen on January 1.”

The bottled water association would consider suing if the Attorney General’s Office signed off on the ban, Lauria said. “It’s a completely legal commodity, and to ban it runs afoul of interstate commerce considerations.”

As for Hill, Whelan said she belongs to a long tradition of town residents channeling Thoreau and other big-thinking forebears.

“She’s the classic Concordian who conceives of an idea and doesn’t take no for an answer,” he said. “She’s a strong-willed citizen who is very committed to the environment, so in a lot of ways she’s typical of this place.”

Hill’s current battle is lonely, despite the overwhelming support of residents who attended the April meeting. Hill reached out to Corporate Accountability International, an advocacy group in Boston, which gave her a PowerPoint presentation to help make her case. But most of her work — researching online, passing out pamphlets at church — has been solitary.

She recently organized a screening of “Tapped,” a documentary about alleged abuses in the bottled water industry, at the local high school. A representative from Sen. John Kerry’s office came — Hill had threatened not to vote for him otherwise — but the crowd she had hoped for did not.

She has critics, including some who dismiss her as a retiree with too much time on her hands.

“Oh, I know,” she huffed, “this little old lady in tennis shoes butting into everyone’s business. “It’s annoying and it’s not true. I’m not meddling; I’m trying to accomplish a legitimate goal.”

Hill attributes the popularity of bottled water to the widespread belief that everyone needs to drink eight glasses a day.

“People thought, ‘Oh God, got to have my water,’” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “If you did that, you’d spend the whole day in the bathroom!”

She does not drink enough water herself, she allowed; orange juice, milk and Scotch are higher on her list.

For those who do sip water all day, she has some characteristically blunt advice: “Get yourself a nice Thermos. I’ll give you one if you want.”