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Empties' promises

Five cents at a time, recyclables help area nonprofits stay afloat

They nickel and dime you all year. But right now, in the aftermath of your libation-fueled Super Bowl shindig, these dimes and nickels (in the much larger, much less appealing form of empty redeemable bottles and cans) are taking up a quarter of your panty.

What to do?

You could schlep down to the store and feed them - one ... by ... one ... - into a reverse vending machine.

You could leave them out for the scavengers who troll the neighborhood on trash day (certainly a worthwhile contribution).

Or, you could give them to one of the organizations in the Capital Region that accepts redeemables as donations.

For some organizations, like the Mohawk and Hudson River Humane Society, the donations that come in this way amount to far more than pennies.

"It is so, so vital," says Valerie Lang, a Humane Society board member.

Bottles and cans - collected from local sites, including Hudson Valley Community College, where Lang teaches, and donated directly to the shelter by individuals - bring in as much as \$20,000 a year, according to Lang.

"It really is a substantial source of revenue," Lang says. The bottle and can drive is so lucrative, the Humane Society had to increase security earlier this year after thieves made off with garbage bags full of redeemables.

Bottle and can donations bring in a few thousand dollars a year to Running On Your Empties, a fundraiser for Music Mobile of Albany, a nonprofit organization founded in 1977 that presents socially minded concerts, workshops, and events.

"It's brought in anywhere from \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year," says Ruth Pelham, founder and executive director of Music Mobile. "It absolutely does add up. It's like every drop of water makes the ocean. Every voice counts and every bottle counts."

Some grocery stores, including Hannaford and Price Chopper, accept redeemables (and the tickets given by the reverse vending machines) on behalf of different nonprofits.

"Through this, we've been able to fund a lot of our activities," says Lisa LeBlanc treasurer for Boy Scout Troop 522, based out of St. Stephen's Church in Schodack. The group has been one of the "featured" nonprofits for which bottle and can donations were accepted at the East Greenbush Price Chopper.

A handful of Capital Region nonprofits, including the Humane Society, have their donated redeemables collected by the Rotterdam recycling company Tomra, Inc., which, through an arrangement with the beverage distributors, passes along an extra 2 cents per bottle or can (bringing the total pay for a redeemable to 7 cents).

The catch to getting those extra pennies - and getting Tomra to pick up your collection - is threefold: Bottles must be clean, sorted by distributor (Pepsi products together, etc.) and put in large, clear recycling bags, which can be purchased at most office-supply stores. Also, make sure you've got enough redeemables to warrant the company's efforts.

"It it's five to 10 bags, it's just not enough, because it's expensive to pick up," says Doris Schwaller, Tomra's billing manager. "In general, I would say we usually require at least 20 large recycling bags."

Schwaller urges interested groups to call Tomra at 356-2597 for further guidelines.

