Every year the Highlands Chamber of Commerce organizes the Highlands Plateau Pickup in April, usually near Earth Day. This coming cleanup will be my twelfth as mayor. I wish there were a way to avoid this cleanup where folks risk life and limb to make our community healthier and cleaner.

I am always so grateful for the caring, volunteer citizens who take part in the cleanup. After the event, we all have a wonderful feeling of accomplishment only to be frustrated by uncaring people who will continue to pollute our roadways with plastic bottles, cans, plastic shopping bags and paper from fast food purchases, etc.

It is a noble effort for us to try to prevent this trash from ending up in our critical watershed. Just recently, a world conference addressed the proliferation of plastic items and the concern that microplastics are infiltrating wildlife, people, and, of course, the water supply and food chain. The conference did not get a united resolution for this problem, but it did warn that plastic use will increase fourfold over the next three decades. What does this plastic explosion portend for the health and welfare of humans living on this planet?

The food and beverage industry is now pushing a campaign spinning that their new plastic bottles are better to recycle. People for several decades were told by this industry that all those plastic containers were being recycled, only to discover the ugly truth that they were simply being shipped to third-world countries to be discarded. That practice continues, especially with electric devices composed of metal and plastics. These countries have large burn pits where the plastic is burned into the atmosphere, and the metal is salvaged.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a recycling system in place where people were paid for the return of glass soda bottles. Then, distributors developed the single-stream system using a steel can containing beer and soft drinks. People were told to throw them away because the steel cans would rust and decay. That information was accurate until the aluminum and plastic containers were introduced. The aluminum can was recyclable and supposedly the plastic container, but no deposit system was put in place like the ones for glass coke and beer bottles.

To add to the outrage, beverage producers came up with an ad campaign, Keep America Beautiful, using supposedly a Native American shedding a tear when he viewed container trash. The message was that the consumers were responsible, not the beverage industry that forsaken the deposit/recycling program, to develop the single stream, end-user plan. Don't even get me started on the landfill impacts.

As I have traveled throughout the United States, I have noticed that some states have much cleaning roadways, free of the plastic litter we see everywhere in North Carolina. Riding through one of these clean states, I asked a friend why this was the case. He responded that some states, like Maine and Vermont, have bottle bills that mandate deposits on glass, metal, and plastic beverage products. Those recycling deposit fees motivate some folks to collect this waste on the roadways and make money at recycling centers.

Ten states have such programs. A deposit is paid for each glass, metal, or plastic container. Those who return the containers to a recycling center are reimbursed part of the deposit. The remainder of the deposit goes to the handling organization.

I like to explore solutions instead of doing the same old thing, like having a volunteer trash pickup. What about incentivizing people to do the right thing or motivating them financially to do what is needed? We need such a program in this state.

Now if the North Carolina State legislature would act and pass a bottle recycling bill. But, the lobby opposition might be intense. Nevertheless, it is the right thing to do not for us now but for future generations. Can the world survive a fourfold increase in the production of plastics?