

*The Nation; Seattle looking to dump throwaway bags; It proposes to charge a 20-cent 'green fee' on disposable grocery sacks, and to ban foam food containers. Los Angeles Times April 14, 2008 Monday*

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**HEADLINE:** The Nation;  
Seattle looking to dump throwaway bags;  
It proposes to charge a 20-cent 'green fee' on disposable grocery sacks, and to ban foam food containers.

**BYLINE:** Stuart Glascock, Times Staff Writer

**DATELINE:** SEATTLE

**BODY:**

Conservation-minded Seattlites know their garbage. They pack compost bins, fill yard waste carts, separate glass bottles and jars into tubs, and pack paper, cans and plastic jugs into oversize recycling containers. A city ordinance prohibits putting recyclables in the garbage.

Residents can be fined for tossing too much glass or paper in the trash. Low-cost city-issued rain barrels help homeowners reroute well-known Northwest drizzle.

So no shock greeted Seattle's latest eco-friendly proposal from Mayor Greg Nickels and City Council President Richard Conlin. It would impose a 20-cent "green fee" on all disposable shopping bags. It targets both paper and plastic bags at grocery, drug and convenience stores.

"The answer to the question 'paper or plastic' is neither. Both harm the environment," the mayor said in pushing for the citywide change.

The measure also would ban foam containers in the food service industry, such as restaurant plates, trays and cups and grocery stores' meat trays and egg cartons.

The response to the proposed green fee and ban on foam, announced April 2, has mostly been positive, Nickels said. .

"It sparked a good debate in grocery stores, and on blogs," the mayor said. "People are talking and bringing up good issues. We've got a good proposal."

Seattle goes through 360 million throwaway paper and plastic bags every year, Nickels said.

"We are faced with changing our culture from one of conspicuous consumption to conspicuous conservation," Nickels said. "Seattle is a good place to do that. Seattle has had a strong conservation ethic for a long time."

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'I expect it will pass'

The City Council expects to vote on the proposal in June. If adopted, the measure will take effect in January 2009. Retailers would keep 5 cents per bag to cover the administrative costs. Store owners grossing less than \$1 million annually will keep the entire fee.

"The council is very supportive, and I expect it will pass," Conlin said. "The public has been generally supportive. The plastic industry doesn't like it."

In fact, the American Chemistry Council intends to lobby against the proposal. It sees plastic recycling as a better alternative, said Keith Christman, senior director of packaging for the chemistry council's Progressive Bag Affiliates.

"We appreciate the city's interest in reducing waste," Christman said. "The tax is not the right approach. Recycling plastic bags is the right approach."

Studies show that consumers recycle and reuse their plastic bags, he said. Sales of plastic bags go up when plastic bags are prohibited, he said.

"Once people understand that plastic bags are recyclable and reusable, people will do that," Christman said.

But the trend in a number of countries is away from plastic bags.

Ireland started taxing them in 2003. China's ban on free plastic bags begins June 1. Shoppers must pay for the bags in Switzerland, Germany and Holland.

Ikea, the Swedish home furnishings store that has charged 5 cents for plastic bags since March 2007, will pull them from all U.S. stores in October.

Last year, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban nonbiodegradable plastic bags in large grocery stores and drugstores.

"Right before our eyes we see habits changing for the better," said Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, sponsor of San Francisco's ban.

Mirkarimi views switching from plastic bags to reusable ones as a modest local act that has international implications.

"Climate change is so severe people feel paralyzed and yet they are desirous to do something," he said. "Instead of waiting for the federal government, municipal governments can do some things."

A range of far-reaching issues drove Mirkarimi to push the San Francisco measure. He said over-reliance on oil, insufficient pursuit of renewable energy, the war in Iraq and the U.S. refusal to sign the Kyoto Treaty "created a stew of inspiration to try and do something locally."

California cities, said Mirkarimi, essentially have two options: recycle plastic bags or ban them outright. California lawmakers passed a state law specifically prohibiting municipalities from levying taxes similar to Seattle's planned green fee.

"Locally, it's about litter, debris, the fact these plastic bags take a millennium to degrade," Mirkarimi said. "Despite the propaganda the industry says, there is no recycling of plastic bags. Only a tiny percentage of bags are recycled. The challenge is not to recycle more but to decrease reliance on bags."

He doesn't have to convince his municipal brethren in Seattle.

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Fashion statement

Practically overnight, Mayor Nickels' proposed green fee jump-started a cottage industry -- supplying fashionable reusable bags.

In one case, the owners of PB&J Textiles in Seattle heard the mayor's proposal and immediately pressed their custom embroidery and garment printing shop into action.

They cranked out a series of large, sturdy canvas bags emblazoned with anti-plastic bag messages:

"Look mom I just saved 20 cents," "Just say no to plastics" and "No tax required."

On display in their shop window, the newly minted, reusable bags spark interest and

sales, said co-owner David Robertson.

"We read about it and decided to try something," said Robertson, who acknowledges that he usually forgets to take a canvas bag along when he goes shopping.

"We are so used to the plastic bags," he said. "It will take time."

Even the mayor admits he struggles to remember to bring along reusable bags. But he has started keeping them in the family car. Still, Nickels said, "about half the time we get to the register and have forgotten the bag."

"It will," he said, "take a bit of time and effort to make the change."

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**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO: 360 MILLION: That's how many paper and plastic bags the city goes through in a year, says the mayor, who along with the City Council president proposed the measure. PHOTOGRAPHER: Scott Eklund Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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