



-- CLOSE WINDOW--

Print Version

Print Page

Last modified: Thursday, March 13, 2008 10:52 PM EDT

Law



Discarded plastic grocery bags quickly become an eyesore. Item photo / Reba M. Saldanha

proposed to tax plastic grocery bags

By David Liscio / The Daily Item

A bill making its way through the state Senate would tax plastic grocery bags, but opponents say such legislation isn't necessary because the public is voluntarily shifting toward reusable cloth sacks.

Bill No. 2521 is currently under study by members of the Joint Committee on Revenues and would impose a tax of 2 cents per carryout bag on the store.

The tax would increase annually until it reached 15 cents per bag in 2014. Under the initial version of the bill, stores would be responsible for paying the excise tax to the state and the cost presumably would be passed along to the customers. A subsequent version seems to suggest consumers would pay for each bag at the cash register.

At least one Legislative watchdog group, Citizens for Limited Taxation, said the plastic bag tax proposal should be resisted. Among the reasons cited by CLT, led by citizen advocate and tax reformist Barbara Anderson of Marblehead, is the fact that Massachusetts is already home to the fifth-highest per capita tax burden.

"Massachusetts should not be passing new taxes. Food costs are up and consumers don't need to pay more, either as a direct tax per bag or the pass-through from an excise on the grocery stores," Anderson said.

Secondly, the bill sponsors "are tagging along behind a movement that doesn't need government intervention. Whole Foods (supermarket chain) is already requiring its customers to use cloth bags. Other large grocery stores are selling inexpensive sacks and have plastic bag recycling boxes at the door," she said, adding that environmental, consumer and scouting groups can make this a project and get the job done.

State Sen. Brian Joyce and Reps. Denise Provost and Robert M. Koczera are the key sponsors of the bill.

Since the bill excludes paper bags, aside from lacking concern about trees, its sponsors have apparently never lived downwind or downstream from a paper mill, Anderson said.

Whole Foods, which has a store in Swampscott's Vinnin Square, is merely one supermarket chain attempting to wean its customers of plastic and paper grocery bags, and instead teach them to rely on cloth sacks that can be used for years. At Trader Joe's, another specialty food market in Vinnin Square, the wall near the checkout is lined with colorful sacks that customers can purchase for less than \$5.

The situation plays out in most American cities with slight variations - paper bags versus plastic, with cloth sacks recognized as the more environmentally-sound choice, there has been little talk of taxation.

Not so in Ireland, where in 2002 the government passed a plastic bag tax - now 22 Euro cents or about 33 U.S. cents - payable at the store cash register along with your purchases. The tax was accompanied by an advertising awareness campaign, but nobody anticipated the results.

Within weeks, there was a 94 percent drop in plastic bag use. A year later, just about everyone has switched to reusable cloth bags, which are now often kept in offices or car trunks. Taking the evolution a step further, plastic bags in Ireland have become socially unacceptable, on par with wearing a fur coat or not cleaning up after your dog.

Still, the plastic bag industry that rose to prominence in the 1970s cranks on, as evidenced by data that suggests more than 30 billion bags were used during the first month of 2008, most of which were one-time use and then discarded.

According to reusablebags.com, the vast majority of plastic bags end up as waste, landfill, or litter. Since they are lightweight and compressible, they constitute only two percent of landfill material. Unfortunately, they are not bio-degradable.

Vincent Cobb, founder and president of reusablebags.com, an entrepreneur who founded the company four years ago to promote the issue, said people have become more conscious about the environment, and plastic bags are something to which everyone can relate. As he put it, "Plastic bags are a brilliant product but they are a victim of their own success. They've been perceived of as free when they have a real cost to the environment and to consumers."

Even the least ecologically literate customer today is likely to have seen or heard about the damage plastic bags can do in the natural world, from creating visual pollution to mounds of unwanted waste that must be burned in incinerators or buried in landfills. Rare species of sea turtles choke on these bags, swallowing them in the mistaken belief they are floating jellyfish.

"Even if plastic bags were biodegradable, they would need to be exposed to sunlight to break down. But most people stuff them by the dozen into larger plastic trash bags, which then get buried in a landfill and never decompose," Anderson said. "So the bottom line is, we don't need another law because the public is moving on this without the assistance of the Legislature. The government should be doing other things, like figuring out what to do about the state's crumbling infrastructure, judges who let drunk drivers out of jail, public safety, and a massive debt. But doing something about those things requires thought."

.....
-- CLOSE WINDOW--