

WASHINGTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, February 27, 2009

Proposed fees on plastic and paper worry retailers

Washington Business Journal - by [Jonathan O'Connell and Vandana Sinha Staff Reporters](#) Staff Reporters

City Lights of China delivery crews have mastered the method: Place Chinese carryout cartons inside crisp, sturdy paper bags. Then dump the paper bag inside a plastic bag to make the actual act of carrying-out that much easier. It's a bagging ritual they perform as many as 100 times a day.

Soon, that packaging process could cost the Dupont Circle and Bethesda restaurant's customers a nickel per bag each time a meal arrives at their doorsteps.

Proposed D.C. and Maryland legislation would exact a 5 cent fee for every plastic and paper bag distributed by retailers, primarily food and pharmaceutical companies, and some businesses aren't happy about it.

The bills, introduced by D.C. Councilman Tommy Wells, D-Ward 6, and Maryland Del. Alfred Carr, D-Montgomery County, aim to block a bag's journey from littering consumers to the Potomac watershed.

Part of the fee would be retained by the stores, while most of it flows to educational and cleanup campaigns to eradicate litter from the waterways.

Additionally, in D.C., where an estimated \$3 million to \$4 million is expected the first year, some money would buy reusable bags for needy citizens.

However, some businesses fear the legislation adds unnecessary costs to both retailer and resident in the midst of a disastrous economy.

"Everything counts for people nowadays, even 5 cents," said City Lights part-owner Daniel Chang. "People question all kinds of increases. We pay a 10 percent sales tax. That's enough. We're supposed to be a business-friendly city. That's not real friendly."

The fee's supporters say it is a small price to pay to stem the tide of plastic bags, which make up a fifth of the Anacostia River's trash, and half of its tributaries' trash, according to the D.C. Department of the Environment. And Wells says the bags are nonessential packaging, unlike soda cans.

Nationally, no jurisdiction charges fees for bags, though about 15 cities are mulling it this year. Nearly 50 jurisdictions have a plastic bag fee, a ban or recycling proposals up for consideration. In Virginia, industry opposition swept a ban and 5 cent fee off the table this year.

"We think they are the wrong approach," said Shari Jackson, director of Progressive Bag Affiliates in the plastics division of the **American Chemistry Council**, an Arlington trade group. "They have not been shown to work. We have been working on recycling programs. They've had a better effect in managing bad waste than any fee or tax could."

That is seconded by **Giant Food LLC**, which has seven stores that distribute 6.5 million plastic bags and 725,000 paper bags annually in the District. But the chain also sells reusable bags and recycles more than 2 million pounds of plastic bags annually, said spokesman Barry Scher.

"The objective of Councilman Wells' legislation is noteworthy," he said. "But the mechanism being used, a tax, is simply not a good solution."

Elderly and low-income shoppers would suffer the worst, Scher said. "In these difficult economic times, no one wants to pay more for their food or general merchandise purchases."

Other big retailers, including **Safeway Inc.**, **CVS Caremark Corp.**, **Harris Teeter Inc.** and **Rite Aid Corp.**, are staying on the sidelines, as is the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, partly out of environmental sensitivity, partly because of the possible cost savings.

"We would much prefer not having to collect anything from anybody," said Craig Muckle, spokesman for Pleasanton, Calif.-based Safeway,

However, the company already offers reusable bags, he said, and "we're basically being very neutral on this."

For others, the bill presents logistical challenges: rejiggering computers to automatically ring up the 5 cent charge and making room for reusable bags.

"It certainly does add costs that, in this economy, for any business, are difficult to absorb," said Tiffani Washington, a **Walgreen Co.** spokeswoman.

Wells said he met with more than a dozen companies in creating the bill and believes the measure will ultimately save them money. The legislation would also show how industry and government can work together on green practices, he said.

Although CVS is not actively supporting the bill, Wells said it is one of the companies interested in sponsoring the educational campaign and possibly placing their logos on reusable bags — discussions CVS confirms.

Wells also incorporated Safeway's request that paper bags, which are more expensive to produce, be included in the fee.

"We believe we've really done our job of working with businesses, so it's not environment vs. business," he said. "We're excited because we believe it's a bill that supports business and doesn't demonize business as a polluter."

Where plastic bags go

A District study of Southeast D.C. found that plastic bags make up roughly:

21% of trash in the Anacostia River

47% of the trash in all Anacostia River streams

15% of trash in a Fort Davis tributary

55% of trash in the Watts Branch tributary, enough for one plastic bag per 1.2 feet of stream

10% of trash in Kingman Lake

8% of trash in an auto parts store parking lot

6% of trash in six nearby recreational areas

5% of trash at two nearby schools

15% of trash at the Good Hope Road bus stop

2% of trash at three Anacostia River bridges

4% of trash on 10 nearby streets

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MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE
An occasional feature that digs deeper into things you've been wondering about

Paper or Plastic?

We hear the question almost every time we go grocery shopping. Some shoppers answer automatically: plastic — convinced that they are making a better choice for the environment. Others ask for paper, believing the very same thing. The reality is that both paper and plastic bags gobble up natural resources and cause significant pollution. When you weigh all the costs to the environment, you might just choose to reuse:

PAPER

CONSUMPTION Americans consume more than **10 billion paper bags** each year. Some **14 million trees** are cut down annually for paper bag production.

Four out of five grocery bags in this country are plastic. The U.S. uses 100 billion plastic bags annually, made from an estimated 12 million barrels of oil.



PLASTIC

Worldwide, an estimated 4 billion plastic bags end up as litter each year. Tied end to end, the bags could circle the Earth **63 times**.



PRODUCTION

Paper, of course, comes from trees. Trees are grown or found, then marked and felled.

1. Logs are moved from the forest to a mill, where there is a three-year wait for the logs to dry before they can be used.
2. Logs are stripped of bark and chipped into one-inch squares. The chips are "cooked" with tremendous heat and pressure.
3. Then, they are "digested" with limestone and sulfuric acid until the wood becomes pulp.
4. The pulp is washed, requiring thousands of gallons of fresh water and bleach, then pressed into finished paper.
5. Cutting, printing, packaging and shipping to make paper bags require additional time, labor and energy.

It takes more than four times as much energy to manufacture a paper bag as it does a plastic bag.

Energy to produce bags:
Plastic: **594 BTUs***
Paper: **2,511 BTUs**

7 in 10 Americans do not know that plastic is made from petroleum products, primarily oil, according to a recent nationwide online survey.

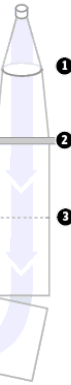


* BTU = British thermal unit

Plastic is a by-product of oil refining. Plastic bags are made from polyethylene, which comes from oil refineries as small resin pellets.

1. A machine heats the pellet to about 340 degrees and pulls out from it a long, thin tube of cooling plastic.
2. A hot bar is dropped on the tube at intervals, melting a line.
3. Each melted line becomes the bottom of one bag and the top of another.
4. The sections are cut out and a hole for the bag's handles is stamped in each piece.

Pellet (approx. size)



POLLUTION

The use of toxic chemicals during the production of paper for bags contributes to air pollution, such as acid rain, and water pollution.

The production of paper bags generates 70 percent more air and 50 times more water pollutants than production of plastic bags.

Air pollutants

Plastic: **1**
Paper: **70**

Water pollutants

Plastic: **1**
Paper: **50**

Plastics production requires toxic chemicals. In an EPA ranking of chemicals that generate the most hazardous waste, five of the top six were commonly used by the plastics industry.

Hundreds of thousands of marine mammals die every year after eating discarded plastic bags. Turtles think the bags are jellyfish, their primary food source. Bags choke animals or block their intestines.

RECYCLING

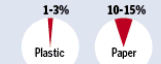
Paper must be returned to pulp by using many chemicals to bleach and disperse the fibers. Although paper bags have a higher recycling rate than plastic, each new paper grocery bag you use is made from mostly virgin pulp for better strength and elasticity. Bags that are recycled are often turned into corrugated cardboard, not new paper bags.

It takes 98% less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.

Energy used to recycle bags:
Plastic: **17 BTUs**
Paper: **1,444 BTUs**

But recycling rates of both types of bags are extremely low.

Percentage of bags recycled:



Recycling almost any kind of plastic involves remelting and re-forming it. Because bags must first be separated by the type of plastic they were made from, the process is time-consuming and expensive. For example, it can cost \$4,000 to process and recycle 1 ton of plastic bags. This can then be sold on the commodities market for about \$32. More often than not, bags collected for recycling never get recycled. A growing trend is to ship them to countries such as India and China, where they are cheaply incinerated under more lax environmental laws.

BIODEGRADABLE?

Paper is degradable, but it cannot completely break down in modern landfills because of the lack of water, light, oxygen and other necessary elements. About 95 percent of garbage is buried beneath layers of soil that make it difficult for air and sunlight to reach it.

Even though petroleum-based plastic will never biodegrade, nearly **4 in 10 believe plastic will biodegrade** underground, in landfills or in the ocean.



Petroleum-based plastics are not biodegradable, meaning they will not decompose over time. But they do take up less space than paper in a landfill: 2,000 plastic bags weigh 30 pounds; 2,000 paper bags weigh 280 pounds.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Invest in high-quality reusable bags, each of which has the potential to eliminate an average of 1,000 plastic bags over its lifetime. The bag will pay for itself if your grocery store offers a 5- or 10-cent credit per bag.

Buy collapsible plastic crates and keep them in your car. At checkout, food goes into the crates, making it easy to bring food into the house in one or two trips.



▶ **No bag at all?** Think twice about requesting a plastic bag if your purchase is small and easy to carry.

▶ **Reuse the bags you have.** Line your litter box with them; crumple them and use them for packing; cut the handles off, add some string and make a toy parachute; use them for an impromptu diaper pail; line your trash cans with them; be creative.

▶ **Keep reusable bags in your home, office or car** so they are available when you go shopping.

The Washington Times

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Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Bag tax aimed at cleanup of river

Mark Chenoweth and Christina Graw THE WASHINGTON TIMES

D.C. shoppers want the Anacostia River cleaned up, but many aren't sure that a 5-cent tax on paper and plastic bags is the best way to get the job done.

"There are a lot of people who shop outside the District, and this will cause people to leave even more," said city resident Willy Adams, 73.

"If they will actually get the money over there, that would be good, but I have no confidence that the money will get there," said Bill, 56, who declined to give his last name.

The tax proposal was introduced to the D.C. Council Tuesday by Tommy Wells, Ward 6 Democrat. It has 12 co-sponsors on the 13-member council.

Mr. Wells said the tax would help the District get one step closer to a cleaner Anacostia River, which is on the receiving end of 20,000 tons of trash each year. The legislation, if enacted, could eliminate 47 percent of that, he said.

Dennis Chestnut, the director of groundwork for the Anacostia River, supports the legislation because, he said, it should "cause people to be more thrifty."

According to a study by the D.C. Department of the Environment, plastic bags account for nearly 50 percent of the trash in tributaries such as Watts Branch in Capitol Heights, compared with 20 percent of the trash in the river. Mr. Chestnut said the bags harm wildlife because the material isn't biodegradable.

He said he hopes the bill will raise "the level of consciousness and stewardship."

Charles Allen, chief of staff for Mr. Wells, said the proposed tax would give consumers a choice between bringing their own bags or paying the tax.

Council member Jim Graham, Ward 1 Democrat and the one member who didn't co-sponsor the bill, said he was concerned that the impact will fall too heavily on the poor. He said he wants to know "more details" about the bill and the effect the tax would have on lower-income families.

The bill states that free, reusable bags would be given to senior citizens and

low-income residents but does not specify an income level to qualify for the free bags.

Some residents said they wouldn't mind paying the tax.

Victoria Salazar, 41, said it is good to contribute to the cleaning of the river voluntarily but that "the tax should also help."

Mary Wilson, 58, said, "I have gone on a couple of projects to clean up the river, and there were a lot of plastic bags there. I think it will help get equipment and people to clean the river up."

But Adrian Bellinger, of Hyattsville said he was skeptical that the bill would help out the river at all. He said the money "always goes to something else."

The Washington Post

Legislators Consider Ban on Plastic Shopping Bags

By Anita Kumar
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, January 22, 2009; B04

RICHMOND -- Virginia might once and for all put an end to that nagging question: Paper or plastic?

Legislators are considering banning plastic bags at grocery stores and chain retailers such as Target and [Wal-Mart](#) because of their potential harm to the environment.

The ubiquitous bags are blamed for choking birds and fish, floating into trees, rooftops and streets and sticking around years longer than paper.

"We're wasting energy. We're polluting," said Del. Adam P. Ebbin (D-Alexandria).

Virginia is not known for progressive environmental policy, but some lawmakers want to help the state find a place in the green movement.

One proposal would force stores to ban thin, single-use bags and allow only sturdy, reusable bags. Others would require stores to recycle plastic bags or charge customers a nickel for every bag the customers receive, and the money would go toward cleaning up the [Chesapeake Bay](#).

"It's one smart thing we can do," said Glen Besa, director of the Virginia chapter of the [Sierra Club](#).

The proposed ban did not originate with environmental groups. The discussion started last year, when cotton farmers in eastern Virginia discovered that bags floated into their equipment, damaging machines and diminishing the cotton's quality. They formed the Virginia Plastic Bag Coalition to look into the issue.

"It's mushroomed into a real strong movement," said Del. William K. Barlow (D-Isle of Wight), whose district includes cotton farms.

State and local governments across the nation have been focusing on plastic bags for years as they search for ways to protect the environment, curb global warming and reform a disposable-minded society. Americans use more than 90 billion plastic bags a year, and only a fraction get recycled.

More than 100 proposals were debated across the country last year, filling the pages of the industry newspaper *Plastics News*.

San Francisco banned plastic bags in 2007, and a few smaller cities followed. But bans have failed in dozens of other places, many of which instead mandated bag recycling at stores and malls.

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Annapolis and Maryland considered bans in 2007, but the proposals died. The District has not considered a ban but has recently started allowing plastic bags to be recycled.

The plastic bag industry association has been lobbying against bans and taxes across the nation.

Progressive Bag Affiliates say that plastic bags require less energy to make, transport and recycle than paper bags; that they take up less space at landfills; and that they can be recycled into construction materials, decking and bags.

"There is a lot of misinformation out there," said Keith Christman, who heads up Progressive Bag Affiliates for the [American Chemistry Council](#). "The challenge is to get the correct information out there."

Plastic bag manufacturers, along with groups representing stores, are encouraging recycling instead of restrictions.

Margaret Ballard of the Virginia Retail Federation said that stores would prefer to start recycling programs before laws are passed.

"It's very costly for retailers to wipe out plastic bags," she said. "And consumers are not educated about recycling. They don't know what their other options are."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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February 24, 2009

Many Plans to Curtail Use of Plastic Bags, but Not Much Action

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

SEATTLE — Last summer, city officials here became the first in the nation to approve a fee on paper and plastic shopping bags in many retail stores. The 20-cent charge was intended to reduce pollution by encouraging reusable bags.

But a petition drive financed by the plastic-bag industry delayed the plan. Now a far broader segment of Seattle's bag carriers — its voters — will decide the matter in an election in August. Even in a city that likes to be environmentally conscious, the outcome is uncertain. “You have to be really tone-deaf to what's going on to think that the economic climate is not going to affect people,” said Rob Gala, a legislative aide to the city councilman who first sponsored the bill for the 20-cent fee.

Regarded by some as a symbol of consumer culture wastefulness, plastic bags have been blamed for street litter, ocean pollution and carbon emissions produced by manufacturing and shipping them. Momentum for imposing fees or bans has expanded from a few, often affluent, liberal cities on the West Coast — San Francisco was the first big city to ban plastic bags, in 2007 — to dozens of legislative proposals in states like Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Texas and Virginia.

Yet as support increased in places, the national economy began to decline. No state has imposed a fee or a ban. Some officials say they fear a public backlash if they were to raise fees in an economic downturn; others say governments need the revenue now more than ever. Still others say a cleaner environment, not revenue, is their only goal. In New York City, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) is proposing a 5-cent fee on plastic bags. The measure would require approval by the State Legislature.

In Connecticut, a bill that would put a 5-cent fee on most paper and plastic bags is being promoted as potentially raising as much as \$10 million a year for the depleted budget of the Environmental Protection Department. “We’re not just exploring how can we get more money out of this,” said State Representative Kim Fawcett, a Fairfield Democrat who is sponsoring the bill. “We’re asking, ‘How can we help people change their behavior?’ ”

In Maryland, Delegate Alfred C. Carr Jr., a Montgomery County Democrat, said the 5-cent fee he was pushing for plastic and paper bags would pay to help clean up Chesapeake Bay. A parallel proposal in the Washington City Council would finance cleanup efforts on the Anacostia River. Mr. Carr said he had not heard residents complain about the proposed cost.

But in Portland, Ore., Mayor Sam Adams said this month that he would not pursue a fee, ranging from 5 cents to 20 cents, that he had proposed last fall. Mr. Adams cited the economic strain being faced by people. “Now is not the time,” the mayor said.

In Virginia, several bag bills have stalled amid resistance from retail groups and bag makers that say bans and fees will increase costs and hurt businesses. “Legislators are sensitive to that,” said Nathan Lott, the executive director of the Virginia Conservation Network. “They’re not demanding a lot of evidence to prove it.”

As the issue grew across the country and overseas, it became layered with debates on topics like the environmental benefits of bans and fees and to how to win support from retailers for them. Over the last year, bag makers have increased their marketing efforts, saying that their product has been unfairly maligned and that they will do more to reduce waste through recycling.

Stephen L. Joseph, a lawyer in the San Francisco Bay Area, is working with several plastic-bag makers and runs the Web site savetheplasticbag.com. Mr. Joseph has filed lawsuits in an effort to stop

bans and fees proposed in California by Manhattan Beach and Los Angeles County. In the Manhattan Beach case, a Superior Court judge ruled on Friday in favor of bag makers, saying the city should have determined whether a ban on plastic bags would have caused environmental damage by increasing the use of paper bags. Plastic-bag makers say they have improved recycling rates through education programs and increased access to receptacles at retail stores; they say those are the kinds of efforts that governments should encourage. “The important thing to understand from the perspective of this industry is that there’s not a single manufactured product on earth that has no environmental profile,” Mr. Joseph said. “For some reason,” he continued, “the great microscope of the environmental community has decided on the plastic-bag issue and decided, O.K., it’s going to be our symbol.”

Despite its popular appeal, the issue has not been a priority for national environmental groups. They are more likely to focus on broad federal issues like carbon emissions, renewable energy and use of public lands. “This thing,” Jerry Powell, the editor of the trade magazine Resource Recycling, said of the bag debate, “is all helter-skelter.”

The Washington Post

Paper or Plastic? Binary Man Has the Answer, Sort Of.

Tuesday, January 27, 2009; B03

From Marc Fisher's blog, Raw Fisher, here's the second in our new weekly series starring Binary Man, who has come to our struggling planet to settle disputes and make life better.

Paper or plastic is mother's milk to Binary Man, one of the great dilemmas ever to break into the popular culture. Breathes there a soul who has not wrestled with this choice? Binary Man can't stand the question at the checkout counter, either, yet he has never forced himself to come to a definitive position -- until now.

Virginia legislators are mulling whether to ban retailers from stuffing goods into those flimsy plastic bags that have become a symbol of our wasteful ways. Legislators in Richmond are considering two bills, one that would force supermarkets and big chain retailers to offer only reusable bags, and one that would impose a five-cent fee on both paper and plastic bags, exempting only durable plastic bags designed to be used every time you shop.

Way too much brainpower has gone into efforts by scientists, advocates and policy wonks to figure out whether plastic or paper bags are more damaging to the air, water, soil, and our souls. Binary Man has learned the ins and outs of factors such as eutrophication, which is the degree to which paper or plastic bags disturb the nutritional balance of the earth's soil as they each sit in landfills. (Paper loses that part of the battle; the process used to make the bags emits considerably more carbon than making a plastic bag.)

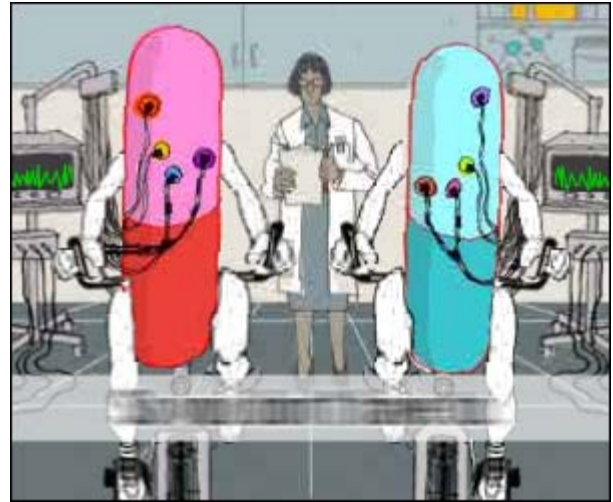
The plastics industry churns out studies seeking to show that plastic bags are better for the environment even if they are made from fossil fuels, because the bags are frequently reused. And it is true that neither paper nor plastic bags decompose to any useful degree in the landfills where most of our trash ends up.

Plastic bags are much cheaper, which is why retailers cling to them. The Whole Foods grocery chain stopped giving out plastic bags last year, a move that dovetails nicely with the greenish tendencies of the chain's customer base. But there's not a lot of science to back up the idea that plastic bags are more damaging than paper ones, especially if you look at the energy that goes into making the bags (about five times as much is needed to churn out a paper bag.)

But paper advocates have strong points as well, pointing out that proportionately far more paper bags get recycled than plastic bags. The EPA says that about 25 percent of paper bags and 9 percent of plastic bags are recycled.

Virginia is by no means the first jurisdiction to consider this path. San Francisco (of course) banned retailers from dispensing disposable plastic bags in 2007, to the dismay of the plastics industry. Somehow, life and commerce continue there.

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But most studies offer little persuasive evidence that we will lead healthier or morally superior lives by choosing either paper or plastic. Rather, the way to make a big difference in what ends up in landfills and oceans is to dramatically reduce the number of bags being thrown out -- whatever their composition. The way to do that is to push consumers to do as our counterparts do in many other countries -- bring their own dang bag to the store.

The argument against this is that we as Americans are addicted to convenience and cannot be bothered to carry our own bags. But even before governments got into the act, many Americans were already learning to eschew bags. Price Club -- later Costco -- has left customers to fend for themselves when moving groceries and dry goods to the car. Far from getting huffy about it, most folks seem to like the idea.

Of the two bills now in committee in Richmond, the more promising, from Del. Adam Ebbin (D-Alexandria), would impose a nickel fee on all but reusable bags. Even in ultra-green Germany, you can get a disposable plastic bag at the checkout counter, but it will cost you enough to make you think twice. Outright bans only alienate consumers and create backlash. In some places where plastic grocery bags have been banned, there's been a marked uptick in purchases of plastic garbage bags. What good has been accomplished there?

The key is to take advantage of people's desire to do the right thing. In the end, whether bags are paper or plastic doesn't matter much. Binary Man will declare progress to have been made when shop clerks give you the evil eye if you insist on buying bags rather than using your own.

Each week on the Raw Fisher blog, Binary Man confronts some issue that bedevils us. Send your questions and ideas to BinaryMan@washpost.com.

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Colorado lawmakers bag statewide plastic bag ban

By COLLEEN SLEVIN – Feb 25, 2009

DENVER (AP) — Colorado shoppers will be able to keep using plastic grocery bags after lawmakers balked at what would have been the nation's first statewide ban on the synthetic sacks.

A state Senate bill banning the use of plastic bags by large retailers by 2012 was defeated Tuesday after a handful of Democrats joined with Republicans in voting against it.

Critics argued that the ban would inevitably lead to increased use of paper bags, which they argued take more energy to produce and take up more room in landfills than cheaper, lighter plastic bags.

Bill sponsor Sen. Jennifer Veiga, D-Denver, said no other states have passed such bans yet and thinks Colorado lawmakers were wary of being the first. She said many were also contacted by constituents who didn't want to have to give up their bags.

The original bill proposed that stores charge customers 6 cents for every plastic bag they use between now and 2012. But the Senate Business, Labor and Technology Committee got rid of the fee at the request of Veiga.

Dick Brown, executive director of Colorado Recycles, had feared the ban could hurt new efforts to recycle other kinds of plastic bags not covered by the ban, such as newspaper delivery bags and dry cleaning bags. He said many supermarkets now accept all kinds of bags, in addition to their own, for recycling but that could end with a ban.

Lawmakers in several other states — Hawaii, Missouri, New Jersey and New York, among them — are considering similar bans this year.

Nine others are considering adding fees to plastic bags, ranging from 3 cents in Vermont to 25 cents in California, said Douglas Shinkle of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Colorado's measure was opposed by supermarkets, big box stores and department stores. It wouldn't have applied to smaller stores and franchise operations.

Veiga countered that plastic bags pose a bigger problem than paper ones because they're used more widely, they're made with petroleum products, and they aren't recycled as much as paper.

She introduced the bill at the urging of high school students at Kent Denver School, who watched the debate from the gallery above the Senate floor.

Sen. Ted Harvey, R-Highlands Ranch, said their intentions were good but said banning plastic bags wouldn't help the environment.

"Human nature says that people will go toward the most convenient product, and that is the paper bag," said Harvey, who said his family uses canvas bags when shopping.

San Francisco has passed a plastic bag ban, as has China, Rwanda, Ireland and Bangladesh. Bag fees also have been considered in New York and Boston.

Plastic shopping bags will be banned from stores in Los Angeles beginning July 1, 2010. Shoppers can either bring their own bags or pay 25 cents for a paper or biodegradable bag.

A citizen's group in Seattle also is challenging that city's 20-cent bag fee and has collected enough signatures to send the matter to voters later this year.

In Maine, a bill that would require retailers to charge 10 cents for each plastic bag distributed to customers is being discussed by a legislative panel.

Colorado Sen. Shawn Mitchell, R-Broomfield, argued that his state shouldn't follow the example of China, which also bans religious gatherings and having more than one child.

Three of the Kent students who lobbied lawmakers by phone and at the state Capitol remained upbeat after their defeat. They said they were glad the issue was debated for the public to see and that more people, including some of the bill's opponents, use reusable bags.

"I think people are changing, but they're not changing fast enough," said Julia Wedgle, who was joined by Katie Imhoff and Krista D'Alessandro.

All three are sophomores and said they would be back next year to try again.

On the Net:

- <http://www.betterbagscolorado.org>

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
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LIFE & STYLE | SEPTEMBER 26, 2008

An Inconvenient Bag

The green giveaway of the moment -- the reusable shopping bag -- is a case study in how tricky it is to make products environmentally friendly.

By ELLEN GAMERMAN

It's manufactured in China, shipped thousands of miles overseas, made with plastic and could take years to decompose. It's also the hot "green" giveaway of the moment: the reusable shopping bag.

The bags usually are printed with environmental slogans as well as corporate logos and pitched as earth-friendly substitutes for the billions of disposable plastic bags that wind up in landfills every year. Home Depot distributed 500,000 free reusable shopping bags last April on Earth Day, and Wal-Mart gave away one million. One line of bags features tags that read, "Saving the World One Bag at a Time."

But well-meaning companies and consumers are finding that shopping bags, like biofuels, are another area where it's complicated to go green. "If you don't reuse them, you're actually worse off by taking one of them," says Bob Lilienfeld, author of the Use Less Stuff Report, an online newsletter about waste prevention. And because many of the bags are made from heavier material, they're also likely to sit longer in landfills than their thinner, disposable cousins, according to Ned Thomas, who heads the department of material science and engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Used as they were intended, the totes can be an environmental boon, vastly reducing the number of disposable bags that do wind up in landfills. If each bag is used multiple times -- at least once a week -- four or five reusable bags can replace 520 plastic bags a year, says Nick Sterling, research director at Natural Capitalism Solutions, a nonprofit focused on corporate sustainability issues.

Just as digital music downloads were the giveaway of choice last year, reusable shopping bags are the new "it" freebie. Earlier this month, Google handed out 525 nylon bags bearing the company's logo at its "Zeitgeist" conference, a meeting of business and political leaders held at its campus in Mountain View, Calif. The Sundance Institute gave out 12,000 fabric bags at its annual film festival earlier this year. Elisa Camahort Page, cofounder of BlogHer, an online community for women bloggers, says she even gave away 150 reusable bags to guests at her wedding last year.

Fueling the reusable-bag boom is the growing unpopularity of the ubiquitous throwaways known as T-shirt bags, so-called because the handles look like the top of a sleeveless T-shirt. An estimated 100 billion plastic bags are thrown away in the U.S. every year, according to the Worldwatch Institute.

Last year, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban the bags from supermarkets and chain drug stores, and this month, the city of Westport, Conn., banned most kinds of plastic bags at retail checkout counters. Boston, Baltimore and Portland, Ore., are also considering bans.

Earlier this year, Whole Foods Market grocery stores stopped using the T-shirt bags, and now offer paper bags or sell reusable totes priced at 99 cents to \$29.99. Next month, Ikea will also discontinue their use, forcing customers to carry their purchases to their cars, bring bags from home or buy the chain's 59-cent reusable blue plastic substitute.

Such efforts are helping make reusable totes the nation's fastest-growing fashion accessory, with sales this year up 76% to date over last year, according to Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst at the market researcher NPD Group. At Bags on the Run, an online-based

Phoenix company that sells nonwoven polypropylene bags, sales this year are up 1,000% to date over last year, according to Aerin Jacob, senior vice president of business development. Eco-Bags Products, which sells bags made of fabric, recycled materials and plastic, had \$2.2 million in sales in 2007, a 300% increase over 2006, says Sharon Rowe, who heads the Ossining, N.Y.-based company. ChicoBag, in Chico, Calif., has tripled sales of its \$5 reusable polyester tote this year, says president Andy Keller.

Starting Monday, Target will move displays of its own 99-cent totes to the checkout lanes, to boost the bags' sales. On Wednesday, Rite Aid, which currently sells its branded bags in selected markets, will start stocking them in all of its 4,930 stores. CVS expects to have three million of its own bags in the marketplace within the next year.

Finding a truly green bag is challenging. Plastic totes may be more eco-friendly to manufacture than ones made from cotton or canvas, which can require large amounts of water and energy to produce and may contain harsh chemical dyes. Paper bags, meanwhile, require the destruction of millions of trees and are made in factories that contribute to air and water pollution.

Many of the cheap, reusable bags that retailers favor are produced in Chinese factories and made from nonwoven polypropylene, a form of plastic that requires about 28 times as much energy to produce as the plastic used in standard disposable bags and eight times as much as a paper sack, according to Mr. Sterling, of Natural Capitalism Solutions.

Some, such as the ones sold in Gristedes stores in New York that are printed with the slogan "I used to be a plastic bag," are misleading. Those bags are also made in China from nonwoven polypropylene and have no recycled content. Stanley Joffe, president of Earthwise Bag Co., the Commerce, Calif., company that designed the bags, says the slogan is meant to point out that the bag itself is reusable, taking the place of a disposable plastic bag.

Some plastic bags are, in fact, made with recycled materials. The polypropylene bags at Staples are made from 30% recycled content, according to company spokesman Mike Black. Target sells six types of bags, including a \$5.99 variety made from recycled plastic bags, says spokesman Steve Linders.

And yesterday, at the Clinton Global Initiative, a public-policy gathering in New York of business and political leaders, Wal-Mart pledged to reduce plastic bag waste by about 33% in every store world-wide in the next five years. Starting next month, the company will sell a new blue reusable plastic bag with a small amount of recycled material for 50 cents, half the price of its current black bag, which is 85% recycled plastic, says spokeswoman Shannon Frederick.

Getting people to actually use the bags is another matter. Maximizing their benefits requires changing deeply ingrained behavior, like getting used to taking 30-second showers to lower one's energy and water use. At present, many of the bags go unused -- remaining stashed instead in consumers' closets or in the trunks of their cars. Earlier this year, KPIX in San Francisco polled 500 of its television viewers and found that more than half -- 58% -- said they almost never take reusable cloth shopping bags to the grocery store.

Phil Rozenski, director of environmental strategies at the plastic bag maker Hilex Poly Co., believes even fewer people remember to use them. Based on consumer surveys conducted by the company, he says roughly the same number of people reuse their bags as bring disposable bags back to the grocery store for recycling -- a figure he puts at about 10% of consumers, according to industry data.

This month at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, marketing professor Baba Shiv dedicated the first day of a weeklong seminar on green marketing to the "road blocks" facing reusable bags. He says it can take "years and decades" for consumers to change their shopping habits, and only when there's a personal reward or an obvious taboo associated with the change: "Is it taboo yet to be carrying plastic bags? I don't think so." Mr. Shiv also says that according to surveys done by his graduate students, many shoppers say they are less likely to carry a retailer's branded reusable bag into a competing store. "What these bags are doing is increasing loyalty to the store," he says.

Dan Fosse, president of Cambridge, Minn.-based Innovative Packaging, produces a line of bags called SmarTote. Each one comes with a bar code that allows stores to track whether it is being reused. The idea, says Mr. Fosse, whose bags carry the slogan "Saving the World One Bag at a Time," is that companies can offer prizes or other incentives to customers who can prove their bag isn't just collecting dust at home.

Grocery stores are starting to report incremental results, says Mr. Fosse, who added the bar codes last spring. "It's really hard to change customer behavior."

Sarah De Belen, a 35-year-old mother of two from Hoboken, N.J., says she uses about 30 or 40 plastic bags at the grocery store every week. Late last year, she saw a woman at the supermarket with a popular canvas tote by London designer Anya Hindmarch and promptly purchased one online for about \$45.

But Ms. De Belen says she soon realized she'd need 12 of them to accommodate an average grocery run. "It can hold, like, a head of lettuce," she says. Besides, she adds, it's too nice to load up with diapers or dripping chicken breasts.

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