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Ready for clean break with single-use bags?

By Ecoconsumer
Tom Watson Special to The Seattle Times

What is a bag really? Just a receptacle, seemingly without much importance unless it has something in it.

But plastic shopping bags have become a potent symbol of waste, if not Environmental Enemy No. 1. How did this happen, and what does the future hold for the bag? Let's get to the bottom of the bag battle as we answer common consumer questions.

Q: Didn't Seattle decide to put a fee on grocery bags?

A: The Seattle City Council voted last summer to impose a 20-cent fee for each plastic or paper bag that customers accept at grocery, drug and convenience stores. Originally scheduled to take effect Jan. 1, 2009, the fee will now go to a vote as the result of a petition drive funded largely by the plastics industry. It is currently scheduled to appear on the ballot in August.

Q: I thought plastic bags were the main villain. Why does this proposal also include paper bags?

A: Many governments around the world have sought to reduce the number of plastic bags, since they often end up as litter and have a low recycling rate. But Seattle's proposal acknowledges that paper bags have negatives as well. Paper is more commonly recycled than plastic but also much heavier, and the production and shipping of paper bags creates plenty of pollution. The city wants residents to minimize the use of all single-use bags by switching to reusable bags.

Q: Are other cities considering bag fees?

A: In Portland, the bag-fee concept has significant political and public support. A 5-cent fee for plastic bags takes effect in Toronto in June, and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently proposed a 6-cent fee for plastic bags. San Francisco has banned noncompostable plastic bags at large grocery stores and drugstores.

Q: So are biodegradable, compostable plastic bags the answer?

A: Not necessarily. Biodegradable plastic bags do not break down quickly in a landfill. Specific brands are accepted in programs throughout King County that collect food scraps with yard waste for composting. However, some biodegradable bags might not break down quickly enough in composting and so may not get approved by a processor. Biodegradable bags also cost more than regular plastic bags and are commonly made from corn, which consumes a lot of energy in growing and transport.

Q: Haven't plastic bags been unfairly demonized?

A: The plastic-bag industry certainly thinks so. And items such as paper cups, plastic bottles and cigarette butts do account for much more of the litter in U.S. cities than plastic bags. But officials in Seattle, King County and elsewhere say efforts to reduce the proliferation of single-use plastic bags are justified since they are such a ubiquitous, often-wasteful item, and because cost-effective



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Information

Seattle bag fee proposal:
www.seattle.gov/mayor/issues/bringYourBag

Save the Plastic Bag:
www.savetheplasticbag.com

ReusableBags.com:
www.reusablebags.com

alternatives exist. The recycling of plastic bags also has become a much less viable option in recent months because the prices for recycled materials have plummeted.

Q: Even those opposing plastic-bag restrictions say we should all use reusable bags when we can. Which reusable bags are best?

A: Many grocery-store chains now sell their own branded, durable plastic bags for about a dollar. These have handles and stand up like a paper grocery bag, and they do the job just fine. Buy several and keep them in your car. If you're on foot or take the bus, consider a bag like the strong polyester ChicoBag, which costs about \$5 and compresses into a 3-inch bundle you can stash in your purse or backpack.

Savvy grocery shoppers often use larger, sturdy reusable bags that come from other stores — for example, the Big Blue Bag from Ikea for 59 cents, or the roomy bag from Half Price Books for 98 cents. Hundreds of reusable bags are now available on the Internet and at local stores, so you can easily choose one that works for you. If you can find a bag made from recycled materials, or locally made, that's even better.

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