

## Columnists

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### Notable environmental achievements in 2012

As 2012 draws to a close, let's review a few notable environmental developments in the past year.

By Tom Watson

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Our natural environment never stops changing.

The same is true for environmental issues affecting consumers. They constantly evolve, for better or worse. As 2012 draws to a close, let's review a few notable environmental developments in the past year.

- **Bagging the bags.** One of the most visible "green" changes in Seattle in 2012 involved something that went away. As of July 1, the city of Seattle banned all Seattle retail stores from providing customers with single-use plastic-shopping bags.

Although a few residents and stores complained initially, it appears Seattle residents have mostly taken the bag ban in stride. Plastic-bag bans have also been adopted in Edmonds, Mukilteo, Bellingham, Bainbridge Island, Issaquah, Port Townsend and Portland.

- **Climate-change train rolling again.** Public concern about global warming has ebbed and flowed in recent years, but was on the rise again locally in late 2012. This may partly be due to concerns over extreme weather such as "Superstorm Sandy" on the East Coast.

In early November, climate-change activist Bill McKibben kicked off his national "Do the Math" tour in Seattle before an enthusiastic crowd of nearly 2,000 at Benaroya Hall. In mid-December, about 2,300 people packed a Seattle hearing about plans to export coal through Northwest ports.

- **Medication frustration.** Leftover drugs should not be flushed or put in the garbage. Although a few collection locations are currently available (find them at [www.takebackyourmeds.org](http://www.takebackyourmeds.org)), many local governments and law-enforcement agencies would like to find stable funding for collection of unused medications, for proper disposal.

A bill in the Washington Legislature requiring drug companies to provide a take-back system was defeated last spring for the fifth time, after intense drug-industry lobbying. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Alameda County officials approved an ordinance in July requiring drug companies to fund and provide take-back locations. The drug industry has filed a lawsuit to stop that program.

Locally, the King County Board of Health is exploring options for expanding collection of unused and expired medicines.

- **In transit.** King County Metro Transit switched gears with major service changes this year, eliminating the "ride-free area" in downtown Seattle and expanding its "RapidRide" bus service. RapidRide bus lines are designed to provide more frequent trips and faster boarding.

Seattle light-rail construction continued, as the system expands from downtown to Capitol Hill and the University of Washington. Rails were laid for a new streetcar line linking Pioneer Square and Capitol Hill via First Hill. As a complement to mass transit, a public-private partnership called Puget Sound Bike Share took significant steps toward setting up a regional bike-sharing program.

- **Lighting the way.** Nationally, new energy-conservation regulations restricted the manufacture and sale of 100-watt light bulbs beginning last January. Additional lighting-efficiency standards will be phased in over the next two years.

Here in Washington, Department of Ecology officials finalized plans for the state's new product-stewardship law requiring the lighting industry to fund the collection, recycling and disposal of mercury-containing lights, beginning in 2013.

This law should greatly increase consumer-recycling options for compact fluorescent-light bulbs, which contain a small amount of mercury and should not be thrown in the garbage.

- **Green gatherings.** For the first time in five years, a Green Festival was not held in Seattle in 2012. The largest eco-tastic public gathering in the region is now the annual Mother Earth News Fair, which will be held again June 1-2, 2013, at the Puyallup Fairgrounds.

- **Reaching out.** This was a banner year for environmental-public outreach to area residents speaking languages other than English. Several Spanish-language efforts were launched, including King County's "Recicla Más" (Recycle More) grass-roots and media campaign ([kingcounty.gov/reciclamas](http://kingcounty.gov/reciclamas)). Eco-Lógica Magazine ([ecologicamagazine.com](http://ecologicamagazine.com)), a Spanish/English magazine for the Northwest started in 2009, continued its groundbreaking environmental education efforts.

Thanks to everyone for all you do to make our region more sustainable, and happy green new year!

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