

Disposable Grocery Shopping Bags

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What action is Fort Collins considering taking to curb the use of disposable bags?

- At the City Council's July 1, 2014 regular meeting, adoption of ordinance was supported by a vote of 5-2.
 - The proposed ordinance would apply a 10-cent per bag fee for both plastic and paper grocery sacks used at the check-out register to bag customer purchases.
- Like all ordinances, a second vote must be taken by the City Council before it becomes law; the date set for that meeting is August 19.

2. Why is Fort Collins' City Council concerned about curbing disposable bags?

- Fort Collins adopted a goal of Zero Waste in 2013. Disposable bag ordinances are a tool used by communities to set the path for citizens to employ more strategies in their lives that will reduce waste at the source, not simply recycle or compost it.
 - In the hierarchy of managing waste, "Reduce-Reuse-Recycle" is still as valid today as it was 25 years ago, but while we have gotten very good at recycling, the community still can improve on the "reduce" part of the equation.
 - New re-use habits become a way for individuals to put their concerns into action (many are aware of the environmental impacts from disposable bags and have been distressed by pictures of marine wildlife choking on bags, or rafts of plastic waste floating in the Pacific Ocean).
 - When people get used to supplying their own durable, re-usable shopping bags, they become committed to applying re-use concepts and practices in other parts of their daily lives.

3. How does the money from sales of disposable bags get spent by the grocery stores?

Stores would keep 100 percent of the funds raised by the fee: 50% must be spent to buy durable bags to distribute in the community, for instance:

- Provide to store customers through such methods as customer loyalty rewards, special sales promotions or other offers.
 - Provide to food pantries and other charitable programs to give to clients.
- 50% of the money may be used by stores to recover their costs to administer the program (training employees, reporting requirements, etc.).

4. Isn't it true that bringing durable bags into stores could create a public health risk?

During the twenty-plus years since disposable bag restrictions have been implemented around the world, there have been no reports of public health incidents related to the use of durable shopping bags. In fact, there appear to be only two articles published to suggest there are public health hazards associated with bringing reusable bags to grocery stores.

- Institute for Law & Economics article, Dec. 2012, cited a 46% increase in San Francisco's rate of E. coli-related illnesses as a result of their ban on disposable bags. However, San Francisco's Communicable Disease & Control Prevention Division:
 - Was not able to substantiate the data
 - Doubted if strains of E. coli in bags would be the kind to make someone sick
- A survey of shoppers at several stores in Arizona and California, conducted on behalf of the American Plastics Council (2011 Food Protection Trends, Aug. 2011), established that few people wash their durable bags regularly.

- Hand or machine washing reduces bacteria in bags by >99.9%; it's important to wash/disinfect reusable bags often, as health officials urge, and possibly to designate a separate bag to be used to hold meat purchases.

5. How will the ordinance be enforced?

- Code Compliance staff will respond to complaints if grocery stores are failing to apply a charge of 10 cents per bag at the check-out register, and will visit the store to discuss the situation. If secondary visits are required and evidence shows stores are deliberately failing to apply charges, officers may issue a ticket.
- The Environmental Services department will provide stores with educational materials about the ordinance and work with each grocery store to report numbers of disposable bags sold.
- Non-compliance on the part of the grocery stores is likely to be low in part because stores have become accustomed to these fees in other communities. Whether they're corporate chains or locally owned, stores have an interest in protecting their "brand" and reputation within the community, and avoiding costs of non-compliance (fines as high as \$2,650/day per store).

6. Can't I just recycle plastic bags?

- Every grocery store in Fort Collins offers a recycling collection bin in the foyer where plastic bags (empty and free of moisture) can be placed. The destination for these specially-collected bags is to processing plants that manufacture recycled plastic lumber (such as Trex). Even some "big box" stores like Lowe's accept plastic bags.
- However, national studies show that fewer than nine percent of plastic bags in the U.S. are recycled in any form and it's very important for recyclers to understand that plastic bags are NOT accepted in community curbside recycling programs!
 - If people put plastic bags in their home recycling bins, they end up at the processing plant getting tangled in the mechanical separation equipment and causing breakdowns – they are not recycled and bags still end up in the trash.
- In some communities, plastic bag dispensers in parks are designed to dispense old grocery bags that have been donated, for use in collecting dog feces, instead of using manufacturers' "doggie poop" bags.
- Often, food pantries, farmers' market vendors, and thrift shops will accept donations of clean/dry plastic bags for reuse.

7. What environmental impacts are associated with restricting disposable bags?

- Research indicates that each consumer uses as many as 342 plastic shopping bags per year.
 - 60% of our disposable bags (205 per person) come from grocery stores
- You use 93% fewer resources and produce 67% fewer greenhouse gas emissions when you use durable shopping bags instead of choosing disposable bags.
- Plastic bags are made from non-renewable natural gas and petroleum.
- Plastic bags are a litter and visual pollution problem; once loose in the environment, they will not biodegrade, posing a threat to wildlife and ecosystems.
- Paper bags require even more water to produce than polyethylene plastic bags. Paper bags also consume more energy during transport (they're heavier), create more solid waste and emit more greenhouse gas emissions than plastic bags.
- Using paper means cutting down more trees, contributing to deforestation and loss of habitat.

8. How can we reduce impacts to low-income residents?

- Our research uncovered several actions taken by other communities to address impacts to low-income residents (and work with grocers to mitigate impacts):
 - Most ordinances we reviewed from other communities exempt the charge for bags when customers are using food assistance to purchase groceries (an option in the Fort Collins ordinance).
 - Santa Monica, Calif., and Aspen provide “bag banks” where people can place surplus durable bags they don’t need into small laundry baskets hung outside local retail stores, libraries and recreation centers and City Hall. Those who need a bag can take one, for free.
 - Boulder distributed 10,000 free durable bags at local food banks and charities, which were purchased with the City’s 6-cent share of Boulder’s 10-cent charge on disposable bags.
- Grocery stores could also give them directly to the Larimer Food Bank for people to carry home their food donations.

9. Why allow grocers to keep 50% of revenues for administration?

- Of the 10-cent charge that the City will require grocers to charge for disposable bags, 50% may be used by stores to cover new costs of administering the program for selling disposable bags, including:
 - Initial and ongoing costs for training for grocery employees on the new ordinance.
 - Information/marketing to customers on stores’ requirement to charge for disposable bags.
 - One-time changes to computer systems to handle the new charge and enable tracking, plus ongoing compliance efforts to track/report to the City on number of bags sold.
 - Other ancillary efforts to respond to the requirements of the ordinance, such as making specialty bag orders for durable bag giveaways.
- An analysis was done by TischlerBise Fiscal, Economic & Planning Consultants (Boulder Disposable Bag Fee Nexus Study, September 2012) of retailers’ costs for implementing disposable bag ordinances. The average retailers’ cost for four cities (Santa Monica, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and San Jose), as well as the estimated cost for Boulder’s proposed ordinance, was reported to be \$0.044 per bag - just under five cents/bag - the amount Fort Collins is proposing to allow grocers to retain.

10. Why not consider just asking stores to switch to biodegradable plastic bags?

- Although progress is being made by manufactures to produce a reliable, biodegradable, single-use shopping bag, they aren’t yet widely used, largely due to issues about performance (strength, shelf-life).
- If a bag is marked “compostable” it will only biodegrade under aerobic (in the presence of oxygen) conditions in a hot compost pile.
- Research done by The Garbage Project, founded by William Rathje, discovered that very little of anything actually biodegrades in a landfill (landfills are actually engineered to be anaerobic, or “oxygen-starved”, in order to reduce emissions of methane, a greenhouse gas that is 20-30 times more damaging than carbon dioxide).
- Unfortunately, in the greater Northern Colorado region, there are no commercial composting facilities that have begun to accept biodegradable “plastic” bags for composting.
- Biodegradable plastic bags cannot be recycled with regular plastic bags because the starch or oil additive in them can compromise the quality of recycled plastics.

11. Which, if any, plastic bags get exempted?

- Fort Collins’ ordinance would only apply to disposable plastic and paper bags used to bag grocery purchase at the check-out register. It would not apply to any other type of plastic bag, including:
 - Bulk item bags
 - Produce bags
 - Food-to-go bags at restaurants
 - Plastic bags products such as rolls of trash can liners

12. Do we know how many times disposable bags get reused on average?

- The American Plastics Council sponsored a survey, National Plastic Shipping Bag Recycling Signage Testing (March, 2007)¹ that reported “the reuse of plastic shopping bags is nearly universal” (92%), with about two-thirds (65%) of respondents using them to contain trash (e.g., wastebasket liner, animal refuse), carry/transport items, use as a lunch bag or storage, etc.
- Seattle Public Utilities contracted Elway Research to conduct a survey, Public Opinion on Disposable Plastics (December, 2007)² and found that 51% of respondents reused disposable plastic bags.
- Both studies seem to account for a single reuse of disposable bags by respondents - neither of them queried about multiple uses. Investigations did not uncover research to quantify if/when disposable bags are reused more than once.

13. Won't people just end up having to buy more plastic bag products, like trash can liners, if they can't get free plastic grocery bags?

Two pieces of research were found addressing the question of whether local ordinances have resulted in an increase in sales of other plastic bag products such as trash can liners.

- An Economic Impact Analysis; Proposed Ban on Plastic Carryout Bags in Los Angeles County was conducted by AECOM Technical Services (November, 2010)³. The AECOM report stated: “The rate of substitution between plastic carryout bags to trash bags has been estimated as seven-to-one. In other words, it takes seven disposable plastic carryout bags to replace one plastic trash bag. Starting with the estimated use of 433 bags per capita under the status quo, a reuse rate of 28 percent indicates that Los Angeles residents reuse approximately 121 plastic carryout bags as trash bags each year. Based on the substitution rate discussed above, AECOM estimates that the proposed ordinance will result in an average demand for 17 new trash bags per capita per year. As a point of reference, Californians purchase an estimated 126 trash bags per capita per year, based on information from the California Integrated Waste Management Board.” This would suggest that shoppers’ purchase of plastic bag products would increase by 12%.
- A second citation comes from Paul Frisman, an analyst for the OLR Research Report (December 17, 2008)⁴ who stated, “According to the January 23, 2003 *Irish Examiner*, Irish retailers noticed “substantial increases in the sale of bin bags, [diaper] bags and pedal bin-liners since the levy was introduced.” He reported that Tesco, the country's leading food retailer, had a 77% increase in the sale of foot-pedal bin liners. Other bin liner sales increased by 75%. He goes on to say, “The Irish government cautions that such statistics may be meaningless because there is no comparable data on pre-tax bin liner sales.”
- Grocery stores aren't the only source of plastic bags. Many other stores in Fort Collins will continue to give away plastic bags for free, including convenience stores, clothing stores, hardware stores, etc. The City of Portland, Ore., provides several suggestions on their website:

Dealing with pet waste: There will still be many plastic bags in circulation. You can continue to use bread bags, produce, bulk or cereal bags, and bags from other, non-grocery stores (like department stores or hardware stores).

Lining a garbage can: Line your garbage can with newspaper and rinse it out periodically. Or buy some lightweight plastic bags and reuse them, dumping the contents into your outdoor garbage can before relining your can with them. Reuse the bag from your cat or dog food.

14. What are the arguments against adopting regulations for disposable shopping bags?

¹ <http://www.bagtheban.com/assets/content/bag-recycling-signage-testing.pdf>

² <http://www.seattlebagtax.org/herrera2.pdf>

³ http://ladpw.org/epd/PlasticBags/PDF/SocioEconomicImpactStudy_final.pdf

⁴ <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2008/rpt/2008-R-0685.htm>

- Economic effects on residents.
- Concerns that shoppers will go outside of Fort Collins because they prefer to get their purchases packaged in single-use bags and don't want to pay for them.
- Compared to the overall amount of waste generated in Fort Collins (~132,000 tons/year), the reduced amount of disposable bags trash (< 1,000 tons/year, according to calculations) isn't very significant
- Some perceive it will regulate personal choice and restrict freedom.

15. Which communities are already regulating checkout bags?

- More than 130 U.S. cities and counties, and dozens of countries around the world, have regulated single-use bags by either banning them, or creating a fee that gives shoppers a financial incentive to bag their purchases in a reusable bag made of durable material.
- Data on the decrease in use of disposable bags (often 80-90% fewer bags are used in communities) show that consumers adapt quickly to shopping bag restrictions and become accustomed to bringing their own reusable bags when they shop for groceries.

16. Will sales tax be charged on bags?

- Yes, at least by the city. Because stores essentially would be selling bags, transactions would be subject to the city's 3.85 percent sales tax on non-food items. The amount would be calculated into the final tax for the overall transaction, city officials said.

17. How much does it cost at the Larimer County landfill to clean up litter from plastic bags?

- Every year, the County spends between \$30,000 and \$40,000 to remove wind-blown litter that escapes from the "working face" of the landfill.
- Much of this litter is comprised of plastic bags; because they are so lightweight, plastic bags get easily picked up in the air (on windy days, plastic bags almost appear to form a "blizzard"). Bags that don't escape in the wind get caught against the fencing around the landfill, where they are able to be collected by litter patrol workers.

18. What are the costs for enforcement?

Code Compliance staff will respond to complaints if grocery stores are reported to the City as failing to apply a charge of 10 cents per paper or plastic bag at the check-out register, and will visit the store to discuss the situation. If secondary visits are required and evidence is shown that stores are deliberately failing to apply charges, officers may issue a ticket.

Code Compliance estimates their involvement is not anticipated to exceed 10 hours per year, which can be absorbed into existing budgets, because non-compliance on the part of grocery stores is likely to be low. Whether corporate chains or locally owned, stores are interested in protecting their reputation within the community, and in avoiding costs of non-compliance, which could result in fines as high as \$2,650/day per store.

19. How does disposable bags usage in Fort Collins contribute to greenhouse gas emissions?

- For plastic bags, most CO₂ (a greenhouse gas) emissions come from upstream emissions tied to energy and non-energy related emissions from the extraction and transportation of raw materials, as well as the high-temperature manufacturing process. Plastic bags are made of plastic resins made from derivatives of petroleum and natural gas. Emissions from the manufacturing process occur when energy is used to "crack" the raw materials – hydrocarbon molecules – into smaller hydrocarbons such as ethylene and propylene, as well as during processing, when plastic polymers are created with different characteristics for different types

of plastic bags. Emissions also occur when plastic bag products are transported to market destinations. Upstream emissions will differ depending on whether virgin stock or recycled material is used to produce the plastic bags.

- For paper bags, GHG emissions occur from both upstream and downstream emissions. Upstream emissions are tied to harvesting trees (wood), manufacturing processes to make paper, and transportation of the product to markets. Upstream emissions are also calculated from the loss of carbon sequestration when trees are cut down. Downstream, paper bags contribute to increased methane (CH₄) emissions from decay of organic materials when they are buried in landfills.

20. How will a charge on bags be administered at grocery self-checkout stands?

In communities that require grocers to charge for bags, computers at self-checkout stands prompt customers with a question at the end of the transaction (how many disposable bags did you use today). When the response is entered, automatic charges per bag are added to the final bill. While customers may sometimes practice deception at self-checkout lanes, for instance by entering a code for lower-cost vegetables or fruits than are actually purchased, grocers usually have an assistant in the vicinity to keep an eye on transactions and to assist customers in the self-checkout lanes, which may help encourage people to be accurate.

21. Why not have grocery stores offer incentives to decrease plastic bags as opposed to charging for bags?

Under the proposed ordinance, grocers who offer a nickel or 10-cent incentive for shoppers who bring in their own bags may continue to do so; at the same time, they would also charge for the disposable bags they provide to other customers. (These two approaches are not mutually exclusive.)