

Shifting to Reusable Bags and Banning the Single-Use Plastic Carry-out Bag in Portland

Frequently Asked Questions

July 16, 2010

Q: Why are cities and countries across the globe banning plastic bags? Why does this issue matter?

A: An estimated 100 billion petroleum-based carryout bags are used each year in the United States. Plastic bags, designed to be used for only minutes, last hundreds of years in the ocean.

Further, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, less than 5 percent of all single-use plastic bags are actually recycled. Plastic bags are difficult to recycle. On a local level, plastic bags contaminate material that is processed through the City's curbside recycling and composting programs. Plastic bags jam recycling machinery and cost local material recovery facilities between \$30,000 and \$40,000 every month. Facilities in the Portland metro area estimate that 20 percent to 30 percent of labor costs are spent dealing with plastic bag film.

On a global level, plastic pollution kills wildlife that mistakes it for food or become entangled. Much of the plastic bags that we discard enter our waterways through storm drains and watersheds, damaging marine systems and entering the marine food web. The nonprofit conservation organization, [5 Gyres](#), describes the situation well:

Take a look around you – most of what we eat, drink, or use in any way comes packaged in petroleum plastic – a material designed to last forever, yet used for products that we then throw away. This throwaway mentality is a relatively recent phenomenon. Just a generation ago, we packaged our products in reusable or recyclable materials – glass, metals, and paper, and designed products that would last. Today, our landfills and beaches are awash in plastic packaging, and expendable products that have no value at the end of their short lifecycle.

The short-term convenience of using and throwing away plastic products carries a very inconvenient long-term truth. These plastic water bottles, cups, utensils, electronics, toys, and gadgets we dispose of daily are rarely recycled in a closed loop. We currently recover only 5% of the plastics we produce. What happens to the rest of it? Roughly 50% is buried in landfills, some is remade into durable goods, and much of it remains “unaccounted for,” lost in the environment where it ultimately washes out to sea.

In the ocean, some of these plastics – Polycarbonate, Polystyrene, and PETE – sink, while LDPE, HDPE, Polypropylene, and foamed plastics float on the oceans surface. Sunlight and wave action cause these floating plastics to fragment, breaking into increasingly smaller particles, but never completely disappearing—at least on any documented time scale. This plastic pollution is becoming a hazard for marine wildlife, and ultimately for us. Our oceans are dynamic systems, made up of complex networks of currents that circulate water around the world. Large systems of these currents, coupled with wind and the earth’s rotation, create “gyres,” massive, slow rotating whirlpools in which plastic trash can accumulate.

Q: What is Portland’s proposed policy?

A: The ordinance being circulated for public comment takes four key steps in the vital effort to transition shoppers from single-use plastic bags to reusable bags. The ordinance:

- **Bans plastic bags**, prohibiting large grocery stores and retail pharmacies from distributing single-use plastic carryout bags to their customers at point of sale;
- **Sets a mandatory 5-cent charge on paper/compostable plastic bags**, regulating the distribution of paper bags and compostable plastic bags to encourage consumers to use reusable bags, and helping defray the cost to stores;
- **Requires** stores to make reusable bags available for purchase instead of distributing single-use carryout bags.
- **Calls for an outreach campaign** that includes a public-private partnership to provide reusable carryout bags to Portland residents; and working with service providers that assist seniors and low-income residents to distribute information and multiple reusable carryout bags to low-income households.

Q: What about paper bags?

A: Paper bag production has significant environmental impacts. This ordinance addresses both paper and plastic bags to drive greater use of reusable bags and discourage consumers from switching out one environmentally harmful product to another. This policy will regulate the distribution of paper bags, requiring a minimum 5-cent charge and will require paper bags to be recyclable and made from at least 40% post-consumer content.

As we transition away from single-use plastic bags, it’s important to note some of the unique aspects of paper bags in the Pacific Northwest. Paper bags are manufactured here in this region. They are easily recycled and composted. Paper bags, while not without their impacts, are a high-value recyclable collected in the City’s curbside recycling program.

Q: What about compostable plastic bags?

A: This policy will regulate the distribution of compostable plastic bags, requiring a minimum 5-cent charge, providing that the City curbside composting program is in place citywide and that the specific compostable bags will biodegrade in Portland's composting process. That citywide program is anticipated to be in place by mid-2011. For more information on Portland's recycling of bioplastics, visit:
www.portlandonline.com/bps/index.cfm?a=229521&c=41788

Q: Won't this hurt our economy?

A: No, this will help our economy. We manufacture paper locally. Plastic bags are not manufactured locally or anywhere in the United States.

Q: Why now?

A: We have been tracking this issue for the last few years, researching the efforts of other municipalities and talking with stakeholders to determine the best policy for Portland. We have invested a lot of time into crafting a policy that is not punitive to business but helps them in their transition away from single-use bags. We've worked diligently to find the balance that's both good for the environment and our local businesses.

Q: In a tough economy, when people are struggling, won't a 5-cent charge be hard for people struggling to make ends meet?

A: In putting together this ordinance, the City has made this issue a centerpiece of our planning. As it stands, the policy allows more than a year until implementation, and we intend to work with stores to help prepare consumers for the transition to reusable bags. We will make reusable bags available to people that need them so they never have to pay the charge. The charge is easily avoidable; the goal is to encourage the use of reusable bags. The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability has handed out tens of thousands of reusable bags over the past two years at Fix-it Fairs and other community events. With our most vulnerable citizens in mind, BPS will launch an outreach effort to ensure that those members of the community who need reusable bags get them.

Q: Is this a way for the City of Portland to generate revenue?

A: No. The City will not see any revenue from this policy. The 5-cent mandatory charge for paper bags is collected and kept by the stores, intended to offset the cost of shifting from cheaper plastic carryout bags to paper bags. This policy is structured to minimize the impact to business in their transition toward reusable bags.

Q: How much will this cost the City of Portland?

A: This policy will not add costs for the City of Portland. The new ordinance will fit within existing city functions, from outreach through management and to enforcement. For example, we have distributed reusable bags in the past and will continue to pursue creative partnerships for bag distribution. In our bag outreach and distribution efforts to date, we have seen that access to bags is not the main barrier to reuse. Single-use bags are a convenient habit.

Enforcement will be a complaint-driven process that will be handled within our City bureaus.

Q: Why not let the statewide ban approach be considered first?

A: We are working in tandem with State Sen. Mark Hass, who is supportive of this effort and co-sponsored the statewide legislation to ban plastic bags (SB 1009). We are confident that a citywide policy would provide even more momentum for a statewide effort. Portland has led on other issues where the state has followed with statewide policy.

Q: Which businesses does this policy include?

A: The ordinance includes large grocery stores with gross annual sales of \$2 million or more and large retailers over 10,000 square feet that have a pharmacy. We've started with the largest generators and users of single-use plastic carryout bags. Once the policy is in place and we've had time to evaluate its effect, we will look at phased introductions of other industries or stores that could be included in future expansions of the policy.

Q: Why does the policy include only specific retailers?

A: This will be a phased effort. We want to start with the large generators and expect to expand across all retailers. The last three years, our coordination on this effort has been with the grocers who have been leaders on this issue. Before we expand to all retailers, we want to expand our outreach efforts.

Q: I like my local neighborhood store, and I don't want to do anything that might hurt them.

A: We've designed this in a way that has the least impact to business while achieving our waste reduction goals. Many Portland businesses have already transitioned to encouraging reusable bags, and we want to recognize their leadership on this issue. A mandatory charge on paper helps offset the increased cost of paper bags and encourages the use of reusable bags. Ultimately, if you want to help your local store, bringing your own reusable bags means stores don't have to load those costs on to your groceries.

Q: What is the timeline?

A: The ordinance is being introduced on July 16, 2010 for public review and comment. After the comment period closes, the ordinance will be filed with City Council. It will be heard, testified about and voted on in August 2010 with an anticipated implementation date of January 2012.

Q: How will the City help businesses get ready for this?

A: We're confident that businesses are ready to make this transition; what they need is time to go through their existing plastic bags and adjust their inventory of reusable bags and permitted single-use bags. We're allowing more than a year for stores to get ready, and will be coordinating an outreach campaign to support that transition.

Q: How will the City help consumers get ready for this?

A: This policy aligns with our waste prevention and climate goals. Throughout this year and next year we will be ramping up our thoughtful consumption/waste prevention campaign, a climate action campaign, and food scrap curbside collection outreach. We will also continue our reusable bag outreach, education and distribution and will make bags available to folks that need them.

Q: What does single-use bags mean? What kind of bags will be included in the ban/mandatory charge?

A: Single-use carryout bags are non-reusable bag provided by a store to a customer at the point of sale. Single-use plastic bags are prohibited. Single-use paper and compostable plastic bags may be sold for a minimum 5-cent charge. Single-use carryout bags do not include bags provided solely for produce, bulk food or meat at a produce, bulk food or meat department within a store. Bags provided at the pharmacy for prescription medication are not included.

Q: I use my plastic bags to pick up after my dog. How will I pick up dog poop?

A: Produce bags such as fruit and vegetable bags from the grocery or market will still be available. Newspaper cover bags and dog waste bags are also options. Additionally, customers have until January 2012 to prepare.

Q: How can I remember to bring bags to the store?

A: (1) Always start your grocery list with "Bring Bags"; (2) Keep a collapsible bag in your purse, backpack, or briefcase for those emergency runs to the stores; and (3) Keep bags in your car trunk.

Q: Who else has banned plastic bags or has passed a single-use bag policy?

A: Portland is not the first to address this issue. Many jurisdictions have passed some sort of single-use bag policy including Washington D.C., San Francisco, Maui, Ireland, Mexico City, Italy, Germany, South Africa, Bangladesh.

- Fee: Washington D.C., Ireland, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Taiwan, South Africa (thin plastic bags)
- Ban: San Francisco, Oakland, Maui, Mexico City, China, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Mumbai, South Africa (thin plastic bags)

Portland has led the nation on solid waste and recycling initiatives including a Styrofoam (polystyrene) ban, the Oregon Bottle Bill, high recycling rates, and a culture of reuse. It is time for Portland to act on reducing our single-use bag consumption.