



City of Seattle

Gregory J. Nickels, Mayor

Richard Conlin, Seattle City Council President

NEWS RELEASE

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Nickels and Conlin Propose Green Fee on Shopping Bags, Ban on Foam

Proposed Waste Prevention Measures Would Take Effect Jan. 1, 2009

SEATTLE — Mayor Greg Nickels and City Council President Richard Conlin today proposed a 20-cent “green fee” on all disposable shopping bags at the city’s grocery, drug and convenience stores. A recent city-sponsored report determined that both paper and plastic are harmful to the environment. The proposal also calls for a ban on foam containers in the food service industry. If adopted by the City Council, the waste prevention measures would take effect Jan. 1, 2009.

Nickels and Conlin said the bag fee and foam ban will cut down on waste, reduce the use of environmentally harmful plastics and cut the production of greenhouse gases.

“The answer to the question ‘paper or plastic’ is neither — both harm the environment. Every piece of plastic ever made is still with us. The best way to handle a ton of waste is not to create it,” said Nickels. “This proposal is all about forming new habits. Taking a reusable bag to grocery stores and pharmacies is a simple thing that has an enormous impact.”

“The bag fee and foam ban are the right thing for the climate, our environment, and the long-term economic health of our city,” said Conlin. “We are turning Seattleites’ environmental values into tangible actions. This combination of environmental and economic stewardship will help ensure a truly sustainable city.”

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) estimates 360 million disposable bags are used in the city every year, most made of plastic. Almost 75 percent of these come from the city’s 575 grocery, drug and convenience stores (out of a total 3,600 retail and restaurant businesses). While Seattleites have a good record of recycling paper bags, most plastic ends up in landfills. But paper bags will also be subject to the fee because, taking into account the environmental costs of logging and shipping, they are actually worse for the planet.

The green fee is intended to encourage and promote the use of reusable shopping bags. The city will set aside \$1 million to distribute these bags and promote their advantages. Retailers will keep 5-cents of every bag to cover administrative costs. Retailers grossing less than \$1 million annually will keep the entire 20-cent fee.

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Charging a fee for disposable bags will cut the number of throw-away bags coming out of grocery, drug and convenience stores by an estimated 70 percent or more according to the city's analysis and will reduce the use of disposable shopping bags in Seattle overall by more than 50 percent. By preventing the manufacture of 184 million bags a year, Seattle will cut greenhouse gas production by nearly 112,000 tons over a 30-year period. A similar fee in Ireland achieved a 90 percent reduction in use from 325 to 23 bags per person per year.

The proposed ban on foam containers used by the food service industry would include such items as plates, trays, "clamshells" and hot and cold beverage cups used at restaurants, delicatessens, fast food outlets and coffee shops, and meat trays and egg cartons used at grocery stores. The legislation would also require that by July 1, 2010, all food service businesses currently using disposable plastic or plastic-coated paper products to convert to packaging that is compostable or locally recyclable.

Cities across the world are adopting policies to discourage throwaway plastic and plastic-coated paper products in the food service industry, said Conlin and Nickels. As a result, manufacturers and suppliers are responding with new products — including compostable plastics made from vegetable sources, such as corn starch and sugar cane. Over the next two years there will likely be a variety of new products on the market.

More than 20 U.S. cities have banned polystyrene food packaging, including Portland, Ore., San Francisco, Oakland, Calif., and Suffolk County, N.Y.

To smooth the transition, the city will set up business advisory committees representing the retail and restaurant sectors. In addition, the city will help food service businesses work together for lower prices on new compostable products.

SPU expects to collect about \$10 million annually from the green fee. About \$2 million will be spent to promote the switch to reusable bags, including the distribution of free bags to low income families and those on fixed incomes. The rest of the money, about \$8 million, will go toward waste prevention and recycling programs and environmental education programs.

The foam ban and green fee for shopping bags are just two of several parts of the city's new waste reduction and recycling strategies approved by the Council and mayor in 2007. The overall goal is to increase Seattle's recycling rate to 70 percent by 2025 and reduce the amount of waste shipped to landfills by at least one percent per year over the next five years.

According to a study recently conducted by Herrera Environmental for SPU, all disposable paper and plastic bags have significant energy, climate change, wastewater, litter and water quality impacts on the region's environment — although plastic is especially damaging to marine animals and shore birds.

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The Herrera study examined the life cycle environmental impact of disposable shopping bags and found the overall impact of paper bags was four times worse than that of an equal number of plastic bags (for all categories weighted equally), and worse in every category except litter and marine litter. Banning plastic bags but not paper would push stores and shoppers to use more paper bags, resulting in significantly greater greenhouse gas generation.

For more information, go to: <http://www.seattle.gov/util/bagsandfoam>

Visit the mayor's web site at <http://www.seattle.gov/mayor>. Get the mayor's inside view on initiatives to promote transportation, public safety, economic opportunity and healthy communities by signing up for The Nickels Newsletter at www.seattle.gov/mayor/newsletter_signup.htm

Subscribe to City Council President Conlin's monthly newsletter, *Making It Work*. www.mailermailer.com/x?oid=33062p. *Making It Work* will keep you up to date on the City's emergency management initiative, strategies to reduce solid waste, and other ways the City Council is working to make the Seattle more sustainable.

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