

**City of Seattle
Disposable Shopping Bags
Green Fee**

and

Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) Foam Food Container Ban

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)



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Disposable Shopping Bags and Green Fee FAQs

What are Mayor Greg Nickels and City Council President Richard Conlin proposing?

Mayor Greg Nickels and City Council President Richard Conlin are proposing a 20 cent green fee on all disposable shopping bags provided to customers at grocery, drug and convenience stores. The purpose of the green fee is to discourage the use of disposable bags of any type and encourage shoppers to use reusable bags.

Nickels and Conlin are also proposing a ban on the use of expanded polystyrene (EPS) containers in restaurants, fast food outlets, coffee shops and all other food service establishments. This includes some of the packaging used at grocery stores such as meat trays and egg cartons.

In addition, because there are a number of different kinds of plastics and plastic-coated paper products used for disposable food service ware — “clamshells,” plates, cups, utensils and so forth — they are proposing a deadline two years away by which all such

outlets must replace these products with alternatives that are compostable or recyclable *and* effectively recycled in this area.

Why are these changes being proposed?

According to a study recently conducted by Herrera Environmental for Seattle Public Utilities, all disposable paper and plastic bags have significantly negative energy, climate change, wastewater, litter and water quality impacts on Seattle's environment. The green fee and ban on EPS food containers will greatly reduce the use — and hence production — of these plastics which remain as persistent environmental pollutants. The green fee on disposable shopping bags, for example, will cut greenhouse gas production now caused by the unrestrained use of the products by 40 percent — about 112,000 tons over 30 years, roughly 4,000 tons per year or the equivalent of taking 665 cars off the road.

When will these changes take effect?

Both the green fee on disposable shopping bags and the ban on expanded polystyrene food service ware will take effect Jan. 1, 2009. Mandatory conversion of other food service ware to compostable and recyclable alternatives would be scheduled for July 1, 2010.

Has any place else used a similar approach to cutting disposable shopping bag use?

The closest example is Ireland where a tax on all disposable plastic shopping bags reduced their use by about 90 percent. The tax is currently 33 cents U.S. per plastic bag.

In a recent test in Northern Ireland, the British food and clothing chain Marks and Spencer voluntarily began charging customers for disposable bags and bag use dropped 66 percent, prompting expansion of the trial into southwestern England. In the next few months, the company will introduce 10 cent (U.S). bag fee in its 600 stores in Britain.

Most U.S. jurisdictions, notably San Francisco, have dealt with the bag litter problem by banning disposable plastic bags but this can increase the use of paper bags, which is what happened in Ireland at clothing and other retail stores, This shift to paper actually increases adverse environmental impacts. Worldwide, notably in southern Africa and in south and Southeast Asia the trend is bans on plastic bags, usually motivated by significant litter problems. Reusable bags, not paper, are the common replacement since in most of these countries paper bags were not extensively in use prior to the bans due to resource scarcity and cost.

Initially, San Francisco was planning a green fee on disposable plastic bags but the grocery and plastics industries combined to pass a state law prohibiting cities from doing that. San Francisco was left with no option except a ban on plastic shopping bags. Officials there consider it a second-best choice.

How many bags does Seattle currently use? Where do they end up when people are done with them?

Although most Seattle residents often recycle or reuse their shopping bags, figures from Seattle Public Utilities waste composition studies show that Seattleites still use approximately 292 million plastic and 68 million paper disposable shopping bags per year. This 360 million bag per-year total, adjusted for differences in population, is close to estimates of use in San Francisco, Ireland and Los Angeles County.

Use ranges from 300 to 600 disposable plastic shopping bags per person per year. In Seattle, plastic bag use is estimated at about 485 plastic and 110 paper bags per person per year.

A state litter study conducted in 2004 found that paper one-time take out food containers made up 1.6 percent of the total litter collected, plastic one-time take out food containers made up 0.9 percent; paper bags were 1.7 percent, and plastic bags and film totaled 2.9 percent (Department of Ecology 2005). The City's own waste composition study in 2004 found that:

- Paper and plastic bags represent 1.8 percent (by weight) of residential waste disposed.
- Paper and plastic bags represent 0.5 percent (by weight) of all waste disposed.
- Paper and plastic bags represent 3.8 percent (by volume) of residential waste disposed.
- Paper and plastic bags represent 1.2 percent (by volume) of all waste disposed.

Both paper and plastic bags are recyclable in Seattle's curbside system. Recovery of paper bags is estimated at 82 percent, of plastic only 13 percent, not very good but still lots higher than the national average of about 3 percent.

Recycled brown (kraft) paper bags sorted from the stream of recyclables at the Allied Waste processing facility in SODO are often made into cardboard. Some bags pass through and end up in the bales of mixed paper which is commonly made into the middle layer of corrugated cardboard, newsprint, or paperboard, typically the gray paper liner in cereal and cracker boxes.

Some of the plastic film recycled here, including plastic bags, is made into plastic lumber or wood-plastic composite lumber (commonly used for decking), pipe, garden edging, or shipping corner boards. Other plastic film is shipped to Asia where it is made into a number of consumer products, component parts or black bags.

Why is a green fee being used?

Green, or advanced recovery fees are not new. For example, here in Washington, they are charged on vehicle batteries and tires. Currently, Californians pay an advanced recovery fee when they buy computers or other electronics, allowing them to turn the products in for recycling later at no charge. Applied to disposable shopping bags, the idea behind the green fee is to discourage the use of particular one-time, throw away products, promote the use of reusable alternatives and provide some funding for recycling the remaining number of bags and other recycling programs. Advance recovery fees are sometimes called “environmental fees” or “impact fees.”

How will the green fee work?

The green fee of 20 cents for each disposable shopping bag will be added to shoppers’ bills at grocery, drug and convenience stores when they check out and it will show on the receipts they get. When they bring their own bags, there will be no charge. Stores will keep track of the number of bags for which the green fee is collected and — most likely quarterly — remit a portion of the fees to the City, keeping 25 percent to cover their own costs. Small stores with revenues of less than \$1 million per year will be required to collect the disposable bag fee but may keep all of the revenue to offset their costs.

Why not just ban plastic shopping bags?

Seattle Public Utilities’ study which examined the life cycle environmental impact of disposable shopping bags found that the impact of paper bags was overall four times worse than that for an equal number of plastic bags (for all environmental impact categories weighted equally) and worse in every category except litter and marine litter. Banning plastic bags only would push stores and shoppers to paper bags, resulting in significantly greater greenhouse gas generation.

According to the Washington Toxic Release Inventory for 2004, paper and allied products manufacturing accounted for 7.8 million pounds of toxic releases in that year (26 percent of the total). Releases were primarily methanol, hydrochloric acid, ammonia, and nitrate compounds, but included dioxins, polycyclic aromatic compounds, lead, acetaldehyde, formaldehyde, benzene, toluene, mercury, and arsenic among others. The manufacturing process for pulp and paper mills are also large sources of air pollutants, such as CO₂, nitrous oxides, sulfur dioxides, carbon monoxides, and particulates. The pollutants contribute to global warming, as well as ozone, acid rain, and respiratory problems.

What is the expected reduction in disposable grocery bag usage?

Seattle Public Utilities estimates that a green fee of 20 cents per bag will cut the number of disposable bags distributed by participating stores by 70 percent or more. A similar fee in Ireland achieved a 90 percent reduction in use from 325 to 23 bags per person per year.

How was the amount of the green fee chosen?

The residential polling Seattle Public Utilities conducted indicated that 10 cents was not high enough to really get shoppers' attention. Most importantly, though, a 20 cent green fee will produce real reduction in disposable bag use of 70 percent at the stores where it's charged and more than 50 percent overall, which is the kind of target for reduced environmental impact and less greenhouse gas production that Seattle residents would like to see.

How will the City of Seattle use the green fee revenues?

Total City revenue from the green fee with 90 percent reduction in use at grocery, drug and convenience stores is expected to be about \$3.5 million annually. If Seattle residents reduce their bag use at these stores by only 70 percent, revenue would be \$10.5 million per year. Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) expects collection and enforcement costs to be about \$750,000 per year. Additionally, during ramp up and the first year of the program, SPU expects to spend about \$1.5 million in cooperation with merchants to promote the switch to reusable shopping bags, including underwriting free reusable bag distribution. This will particularly help low-income families and those on a fixed-income.

Generally, revenue will mitigate solid waste rates and support and beef up waste prevention and recycling programs and environmental education programs already in the budget or planned for coming years. This revenue will help keep 2009–2010 solid waste rates lower than otherwise projected. More graffiti removal and more public place recycling are additions to existing programs that could be funded with the green fee revenue.

What stores will charge the bag green fee?

Shoppers will find the green fee at grocery, convenience and drug stores to begin with. This group of stores is responsible for 73 percent of the disposable bags currently distributed in Seattle each year. This is a total of about 575 stores out of 3,600 retail and restaurant businesses.

Are there any exceptions to the green fee on disposable bags?

Yes, bags of whatever material used inside stores by customers to contain bulk items such as fruits and vegetables, potentially wet products such as frozen foods and meat, nuts, grains, candies or baked goods and other prepared foods will be exempt. Bags for bulk materials such as nails, screws, bolts and nuts used inside the store at hardware and lumber stores will also be exempt, as will laundry-dry cleaner bags and newspaper bags. These bags are recyclable in Seattle's recycling program.

Why doesn't the green fee apply to every store that provides disposable shopping bags?

The stores chosen to charge a green fee distribute nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of all the disposable bags used in Seattle, so the green fee will have a substantial environmental benefit with a minimum impact on local businesses.

In fact, businesses collecting the green fee will keep 25 percent of the fee to offset their costs in administration and taxes. Small grocery, drug or convenience stores, those with under \$1 million in annual revenue will be required to collect the green fee and keep all the revenue to offset their typically higher costs.

What about switching from paper and plastic bags and going to "biodegradable" bags instead of a green fee?

Compostable bags that are approved by Cedar Grove, the City of Seattle's compost contractor, have their place in food waste collection programs, as liners for kitchen-counter containers or at restaurants as waste can liners. But many bags marked "biodegradable" and sold in grocery and hardware stores these days are NOT truly compostable.

If bags like these were provided at checkout counters with or without a green fee, they would cause two problems. One is that if inadvertently included with petroleum-based disposable bags in the City's curbside recycling containers, they contaminate and devalue the bales of "petro" plastic bags headed for recycling. Equally a problem, if thrown into the City's curbside yard waste-food waste bins they contaminate the material headed for composting, forcing costly hand sorting or, if that's not possible, disposal of the load in a landfill.

Why not charge the businesses who give these bags out instead?

It's the shopper who makes the decision to use or "consume" a disposable bag. The green fee is meant as a reminder that reusable bags are the better environmental choice.

Why pick on disposable shopping bags? Why not a carbon tax on second cars, or vehicle miles driven?

These are not either-or issues. There are lots of ways to cut greenhouse gas emissions and the green fee on disposable shopping bags is one of them. Each alternative, such as carbon taxes on fuel consumption, for example, need to be examined on its merits by government at the appropriate level. Seattle regulates and handles solid waste and can set an example in that area.

How much will the green fee cost a typical Seattle resident?

Possibly nothing if all the family members regularly take reusable bags with them when they go shopping. In reality, some of the time people will forget and they'll pay a small amount. If a family's bag use drops from several hundred now to a few dozen next year when the green fee is in effect, it might be \$10.

Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) Foam Food Container Ban FAQs

Why ban so-called "Styrofoam" containers and cups? Aren't other plastics just as bad?

Along with expanded polystyrene (EPS), all the other disposable plastic and plastic-coated paper products in fast food and take-out use have various negative impacts on the environment. None stand out as particularly better or worse than others, except that EPS has proven to be an exceptional problem in litter and particularly marine litter. That's why a ban is the right way to deal with EPS now.

The superiority of compostable and truly recyclable plastic products to the disposable plastic and plastic-coated paper products currently in use is why Nickels and Conlin have set a date two years from now for all food service outlets to switch to compostable and recyclable containers, plates, hot and cold beverage cups and utensils.

Why not also ban EPS foam packaging? Don't those "Styrofoam peanuts" end up as litter, too?

The Mayor and City Council in Resolution 30990 asked Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) to look first at disposable shopping bags and EPS food service items. Now that that's done, SPU is studying EPS packaging and a number of other un-recycled, under-recycled and hard-to-recycle materials to see what kinds of policies might decrease their use and/or increase recycling.

Have any other jurisdictions banned EPS foam food containers. How is it working?

Portland, Oregon, was among the first to ban EPS foam food containers a decade ago. McDonald's sued the city and lost and that in part that led to the burger chain's switch to a cardboard container (though sometimes plastic coated), a pretty impressive result for municipal government action. More recently, a number of California cities and counties including San Francisco and Santa Monica have banned EPS in food service and are promoting compostable or recyclable alternatives.

Aren't the alternatives to EPS foam containers just as bad for the environment?

Switching from EPS to other disposable plastics can be just as bad and sometimes worse in environmental impact. That's why Nickels' and Conlin's plan takes a second step and mandates that restaurants find compostable and recyclable alternatives to food service disposable plastic and plastic-coated paper products by July 1, 2010.

Why does the City want to force this change?

There is a long-term environmental goal underlying this policy. Plastic — all kinds of plastics — are persistent in the environment. All the plastic ever made is still around — in landfills, in ocean debris, on beaches, scattered across the land, and in the case of plastic bags, stuck in the trees and against fences. Natural forces such as ultraviolet light may break down plastics into smaller and smaller — but still plastic — particles. As this happens and particularly in the ocean, plastic objects and particles are consumed by animals up and down the food chain. Most notably, this kills birds. In some areas of the ocean, floating plastic outnumbered plankton six to one. Because of plastic's long term persistence in the environment and its effects, we should minimize the production of plastic and maximize recycling of what is produced. And, of course, that also cuts down greenhouse gas production and the amount of material that has to be landfilled.

Are there compostable and recyclable alternatives to EPS foam and the other disposable plastics used in food service?

Because more and more jurisdictions here on the West Coast and worldwide are adopting policies to discourage throwaway plastic and plastic-coated paper products in the food service industry, manufacturers and suppliers are responding with new products including compostable plastics made from vegetable sources such as corn starch and sugar cane and, increasingly, from non-food fiber crops and byproducts.

These products are currently being developed and tested by the market for how well they do their job in the restaurant and for compostability after use. Change is coming fast so over the next two years there will be a variety of new products for restaurants and coffee shops, delis and so forth to choose from.

How will the City enforce the EPS ban and the green fee on bags?

Seattle Public Utilities will hire one Planning and Development Specialist who will randomly and on a complaint basis will check stores and restaurants for compliance and assist the division of Licenses and Consumer Affairs (LCA) with follow up where businesses fail to collect or remit the required amount to the City. This employee will also be able to provide technical assistance for stores needing help in solving problems connected to the changeover to new systems.

LCA will be charged with maintaining the data base of stores required to collect the green fee on disposable shopping bags. The agency will mail out report forms quarterly and collect the portion of the green fees due the city.

Your study shows that banning EPS food containers and cups is actually worse for the environment than doing nothing so why do it?

The study which was completed last year assumes that most short-term changes from EPS products will be to other difficult-to-recycle, non-compostable plastics, so the environmental impact may indeed be higher for a while. That's why Mayor Nickels and Council President Conlin propose a complete conversion from those kinds of products to compostable and recyclable replacements by July 1, 2010. More compostable products are coming onto the market now and conversion may be much quicker expected.

For the entire Alternatives to Disposable Shopping Bags and Food Service Items report, and related materials including Frequently Asked Questions, please visit <http://www.seattle.gov/util/bagsandfoam> on the Web.