

Paper or Plastic? It's in the Bag

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As I've mentioned in countless past articles, I'm a proud fourth-generation resident of Kimberly. In 2010, we celebrated our 100th birthday as a village. Although we were officially incorporated in 1910, our community started in 1889 as a settlement for the paper mill. The village was named after John A. Kimberly, one of the founders of what is now Kimberly-Clark Corp., who built the mill.

Because our community's very existence is attributed to the mill, we are very sensitive about paper. As a kid, I distinctly remember going to the grocery store and hearing a collective gasp from the other shoppers when someone checking out actually asked for a plastic bag instead of paper.

Apparently, Seattle is a community after our own hearts. Late last year, the Seattle City Council unanimously approved a wide-reaching ban on disposable plastic shopping bags. The ban, which is expected to go into effect in June, applies to supermarkets, farmers' markets, department stores, convenience stores and home improvement centers.

While Kimberly residents used paper bags to support the paper industry, Seattle uses them because they hate plastic. Plastic bags are not biodegradable, as evidenced by the trash-filled stomach of a grey whale that beached itself in Seattle in 2010. Retailers obviously offer plastic bags because they are a much cheaper alternative to paper.

Because paper bags cost more, the new rule requires retailers to charge customers a minimum of 5 cents if they require paper shopping bags. This paper bag fee will go directly back to the retailer to help cover the costs of stocking the bags and can be waived for low-income residents. The new ban also does not apply to produce, bulk, and dry cleaning bags in addition to plastic bags used for take-out orders at restaurants, which will still be provided to customers free of charge.

Efforts to ban plastic bags in Seattle began in 2008, when the city became the first in the nation to approve a fee on both plastic and paper shopping bags. The American Chemistry Council successfully mounted a \$1.4 million campaign opposing the 20 cent-per-bag fee, as voters repealed the measure in 2009. Since the first ban, experts estimate that Seattle has used 292 million plastic bags annually, with only approximately 13 percent of those being recycled. Inspired by Seattle, other cities, such as Portland, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. have since enacted similar bag fees or outright bans.

Seattle Council member Mike O'Brian told the Seattle Post-Intelligencer that "the hope is by passing this legislation, we can help shift behavior and get more people to use reusable bags instead of disposable bags." O'Brian went on to say that, "I think we've gotten to a place where it's really going to work for the environment, businesses and the community in general."

The plastic industry opposes bans such as Seattle's. Mark Daniels, vice president of sustainability and environmental policy at plastic bag manufacturer and recycler Hilex Poly, informed The New York Times that, "Moving consumers away from plastic bags only pushes people to less environmentally friendly options such as paper bags, which require more energy to produce and transport, and reusable bags, which are not recyclable."

Hopefully other municipalities follow suit and pass similar laws. After all, without paper shopping bags, what would students use to cover their textbooks? What would embarrassed sports fans put over their heads at games? On boring rainy days, what are kids going to use to make awesome robot costumes? America needs paper grocery bags.

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