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Many Plans to Curtail Use of Plastic Bags, but Not Much Action

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

SEATTLE — Last summer, city officials here became the first in the nation to approve a fee on paper and plastic shopping bags in many retail stores. The 20-cent charge was intended to reduce pollution by encouraging reusable bags.

But a petition drive financed by the plastic-bag industry delayed the plan. Now a far broader segment of Seattle's bag carriers — its voters — will decide the matter in an election in August.

Even in a city that likes to be environmentally conscious, the outcome is uncertain.

"You have to be really tone-deaf to what's going on to think that the economic climate is not going to affect people," said Rob Gala, a legislative aide to the city councilman who first sponsored the bill for the 20-cent fee.

Regarded by some as a symbol of consumer culture wastefulness, plastic bags have been blamed for street litter, ocean pollution and carbon emissions produced by manufacturing and shipping them.

Momentum for imposing fees or bans has expanded from a few, often affluent, liberal cities on the West Coast — San Francisco was the first big city to ban plastic bags, in 2007 — to dozens of legislative proposals in states like Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Texas and Virginia.

Yet as support increased in places, the national economy began to decline. No state has imposed a fee or a ban.

Some officials say they fear a public backlash if they were to raise fees in an economic downturn; others say governments need the revenue now more than ever. Still others say a cleaner environment, not revenue, is their only goal.

In New York City, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) is proposing a 5-cent fee on plastic bags. The measure would require approval by the State Legislature.

In Connecticut, a bill that would put a 5-cent fee on most paper and plastic bags is being promoted as potentially raising as much as \$10 million a year for the depleted budget of the Environmental Protection

Department.

“We’re not just exploring how can we get more money out of this,” said State Representative Kim Fawcett, a Fairfield Democrat who is sponsoring the bill. “We’re asking, ‘How can we help people change their behavior?’ ”

In Maryland, Delegate Alfred C. Carr Jr., a Montgomery County Democrat, said the 5-cent fee he was pushing for plastic and paper bags would pay to help clean up Chesapeake Bay. A parallel proposal in the Washington City Council would finance cleanup efforts on the Anacostia River.

Mr. Carr said he had not heard residents complain about the proposed cost.

But in Portland, Ore., Mayor Sam Adams said this month that he would not pursue a fee, ranging from 5 cents to 20 cents, that he had proposed last fall. Mr. Adams cited the economic strain being faced by people.

“Now is not the time,” the mayor said.

In Virginia, several bag bills have stalled amid resistance from retail groups and bag makers that say bans and fees will increase costs and hurt businesses.

“Legislators are sensitive to that,” said Nathan Lott, the executive director of the Virginia Conservation Network. “They’re not demanding a lot of evidence to prove it.”

As the issue grew across the country and overseas, it became layered with debates on topics like the environmental benefits of bans and fees and to how to win support from retailers for them.

Over the last year, bag makers have increased their marketing efforts, saying that their product has been unfairly maligned and that they will do more to reduce waste through recycling.

Stephen L. Joseph, a lawyer in the San Francisco Bay Area, is working with several plastic-bag makers and runs the Web site savetheplasticbag.com. Mr. Joseph has filed lawsuits in an effort to stop bans and fees proposed in California by Manhattan Beach and Los Angeles County.

In the Manhattan Beach case, a Superior Court judge ruled on Friday in favor of bag makers, saying the city should have determined whether a ban on plastic bags would have caused environmental damage by increasing the use of paper bags.

Plastic-bag makers say they have improved recycling rates through education programs and increased access to receptacles at retail stores; they say those are the kinds of efforts that governments should encourage.

“The important thing to understand from the perspective of this industry is that there’s not a single manufactured product on earth that has no environmental profile,” Mr. Joseph said.

“For some reason,” he continued, “the great microscope of the environmental community has decided on the plastic-bag issue and decided, O.K., it’s going to be our symbol.”

Despite its popular appeal, the issue has not been a priority for national environmental groups. They are more likely to focus on broad federal issues like carbon emissions, renewable energy and use of public lands.

“This thing,” Jerry Powell, the editor of the trade magazine Resource Recycling, said of the bag debate, “is all helter-skelter.”

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