

green guide > green space

Twenty cents for plastic bags

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As Reno City Council gears up for an update on plastic bag bans at its April 23 meeting, Seattle is providing its own answer to the paper or plastic conundrum: Neither, says Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels.

“Both harm the environment,” he said in a news conference reported by The Seattle Times. “Every piece of plastic ever made is still with us in the environment, and the best way to handle waste is not to create it in the first place.”

Nickels and Seattle City Council president Richard Conlin have proposed a 20 cent “green fee” to encourage consumers to bring along their own shopping bags. If approved, Seattle could be canvas-bagging it by next January.

This is the first proposed green fee of its kind in the United States.

The Seattle Times said Nickels and Conlin have been trying to develop a zero waste strategy in the city. They also proposed a ban on plastic-foam food containers and cups at food-service businesses also beginning in January. Nonrecyclable plastic containers and utensils would be banned in 2010.

Seventy percent of Seattle 360 million bags a year come from grocery, convenience and drug stores.

Nickels modeled the green fee on a similar program begun in 2002 in Ireland, which reduced disposable-bag use by 94 percent. However, Ireland had to raise its fee from 20 cents to 33 cents per bag before people started changing their habits.

San Francisco became the first city in the country in March 2007 to ban noncompostable plastic bags. They’ve replaced them with compostable plastic and paper bags.

IKEA stores took the issue into its own hands by agreeing in March 2007 to charge customers 5 cents per bag, the proceeds of which go to plant trees and restore forests through American Forests.

In February, Reno Mayor Bob Cashell asked the City Council to research what other cities are doing with regard to banning plastic bags. There will be a plastic ban update at the council’s April 23 meeting at 10 a.m. at the Reno City Hall, Council Chamber, 1 E. First St. The public can attend as well as submit comments by emailing the city clerk at jonesl@ci.reno.nv.us and gundersen@ci.reno.nv.us. These comments will be added to council members’ packets and become part of the public record.

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