

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Group opposing bag fees collects needed signatures

*Last updated September 15, 2008 10:10 p.m. PT*

**By KATHY MULADY**  
P-I REPORTER

More than enough valid signatures have been collected by a group that opposes a new fee on paper and plastic bags in Seattle to keep the ordinance from going into effect in January as planned.

Instead, city voters will decide the fate of the disposable bag fee during an election next year.

The City Council passed an ordinance July 28 requiring a 20-cent green fee on plastic or paper bags at grocery and drug stores, setting off a range of reactions from cheers to outcry. The council also banned plastic foam food and drink containers. That rule isn't affected by the referendum and will go into effect Jan. 1.

According to King County Elections, the Coalition to Stop the Seattle Bag Tax collected 15,099 valid signatures. They needed 14,374 to qualify the referendum for a future ballot.

Monday's announcement also could mark the start of a pitched campaign among the plastic bag industry, environmentalists, the city and grocery stores.

City Council President Richard Conlin said that in response to the successful signature-gathering drive, the council could choose to ban plastic bags at grocery stores altogether.

"We don't really want to go there. We want to give people options," Conlin said.

The ordinance approved by the council was intended to give shoppers a choice, to take their own bags, or pay the fee on each new plastic or paper sack, Conlin said.

Conlin has just returned from a sister-city visit to Ireland, where a similar "plastax" has been in effect for several years.

The Washington Food Industry, which represents independent grocers, is against the bag fee, and it said it is "eager to educate the public about the environmental benefits of reusable shopping bags and the issue of the proposed Seattle bag tax."

"WFI members are very concerned about environmental issues, but believe strongly it is better to educate and reward citizens regarding the benefits of reusable bags rather than imposing a punitive tax," said Jan Gee, president and chief executive of the grocers group.

Signature gatherers collected 22,000 names on petitions in 11 days to place the measure on the ballot. To be valid, the signatures had to be from registered voters in the city of Seattle.

Much of the signature-gathering effort was funded with \$180,625 in contributions from the American Chemistry Council, a trade group representing plastics manufacturers, based in Arlington, Va.

George Griffin, a spokesman for the Coalition to Stop the Seattle Bag Tax, said the fee is "opposed by a broad spectrum of citizens and stakeholders as unnecessary, placing an unfair financial burden on Seattle's working families."

That many signatures "provides concrete evidence that the City Council was not representing the views of many of its constituents in imposing the bag tax," Griffin said. "You can't cast them as nonsupportive of the environment; they just think this is the wrong way to address the issue."

The American Chemistry Council, which hired Griffin for the Seattle effort, is fighting similar proposals in California and Hawaii.

Hawaii and Maui county councils this summer banned businesses from providing plastic bags to customers starting in 2011.

Environmental groups, which also are gearing up for the fight, say disposable plastic bags, along with other plastics, end up in the oceans and never break down.

"We need to stop the input of plastics into our waters," said Heather Trim, Toxic Program Manager for People For Puget Sound. "Plastics waste has nowhere to go but to swirl around the ocean."

Brady Montz, Seattle chairman of the Sierra Club, commended the City Council and Mayor Greg Nickels for taking the environmental stand.

"We need to stop waste at its source," Montz said.

Grocery-store employees and customers are likely to be caught in the tug of war. But one grocer already has stepped away from the debate.

Larry Nakata, president of Town and Country Market, which includes Ballard Market and Greenwood Market in Seattle, said his stores will remain neutral.

It is a delicate position for Nakata, who is also a board member of the Washington Food Industry, which is fighting the fee.

Nakata said taking sides isn't in the best interest of his company, customers, or employees. The decision will be made when it goes to a vote, he said.

"We feel our customers and staff are divided down the middle, we have decided not to take one side or the other," Nakata said.

"Bags are such a visible part of everyone's life. It has become a rallying point. It is happening all over the world," Nakata said.

"It has become quite emotional."

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