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## Why Seattle's bag tax is a bad idea

By Peter Nickerson  
Special to The Times



Peter Nickerson

THE July 8 public hearing on Seattle's proposed 20-cent tax on disposable grocery bags and a ban on polystyrene foam food containers felt like the Fremont Street Fair. People celebrated.

There were speeches on the evils of plastic, singing grannies waving reusable bags and evil bag monsters parading about the hearing room. In such an atmosphere, it was difficult for the council and mayor to do anything other than say yes to the proposals. But there were good reasons to say no.

Other jurisdictions, including Ireland, France, Italy, India, Australia, China and Los Angeles, tax or ban plastic bags, or plan to. In every case, the overwhelming motive has been to stop a perceived serious litter problem.

In India, plastic bags exacerbated flooding by clogging drains and were blamed for the death of cattle. Here we haven't had bag-clogged drains and, so far, no dead cattle. We don't have a plastic-bag litter problem either. Look around the city. Finding a littered plastic bag can be difficult. Since June 1, I have taken more than 30 five-mile walks in the city. I have seen six littered plastic grocery bags and two of those had been pulled from a trash can by crows.

We reuse these bags for myriad tasks: to carry groceries, line our wastebaskets and garbage cans, distribute our garden zucchini to our neighbors, bring lunches to work and school, carry our gym clothes and wet swim suits, and pick up after our dogs. The tax will induce us to use other bags and containers instead. In Ireland, consumption of plastic trash-can liners alone doubled as a result of its tax.

When the currently free bags are taxed at 20 cents, we will buy reusable bags, probably by the millions. Most of these (generally made in China) are made from woven or flat sheet fabric polypropylene (type 5 plastic). It is extremely durable, but unlike the bag it will replace (type 2 plastic), it is not generally recyclable. Furthermore, because each one of these reusable bags requires as much as 300 times more resources to produce than a "bad" bag, it is entirely possible that the bag tax will result in an increase in oil use and carbon emissions.

The new bags eventually will be thrown away and will end up in the landfill, thereby at least partially offsetting any reduction in "bad" plastic bag waste creditable to the tax.

What about the ban on polystyrene foam food containers? It will cause a shift to much more expensive plastic and paper substitutes, which (like foam cups and plates) don't break down in landfills and are ugly when littered.

The ban will not result in the disappearance of polystyrene foam. The vast majority of it will still be packed around all the things we order online. The city's own study shows that the ban will cause higher costs (69 percent more), more energy use (114 percent more), more carbon emissions (134 percent more) and more generated waste (140 percent more). What are we gaining here?

These are expensive proposals estimated to cost households over \$400 million over the next 30 years. Moreover, they ignore the significant changes that are occurring in bag and recycling technology. Italy and France are exempting biodegradable and compostable bags from their litter-focused bans. Shanghai moved away from banning polystyrene

foam and now recycles more than 70 percent of its polystyrene foam food containers.

Don't get me wrong. For 30 years I have been lecturing students in my economics classes about how taxes can be used to abate pollution. I just don't see that the proposed program accomplishes anything. I want to see the city spend its political capital on policies that have real punch, such as taxes and tolls that move people into buses, or policies that encourage the use of hybrid cars. Instead of polystyrene foam, consider banning gasoline lawn mowers, blowers and weed eaters — and also pesticides, chemical fertilizers and wood-burning fireplaces.

If we must do something related to plastic bags we should strongly consider what New York City did this spring: promote recycling. These bags are as recyclable as bottles and cans. Seattleites will recycle them much more with a bit of education and some encouragement.

*Peter Nickerson, a participant in the Northwest Economic Policy Seminar, has no financial tie to bag producers or the grocery industry. Learn more at [www.seattlebagtax.org](http://www.seattlebagtax.org)*

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