

Commissioner researching plastic bag ban

Pending City Commissioner Sam Adams' research, Portland could be second U.S. city to ban plastic bag use

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Portland could be the second city in the country to put a ban on the use of plastic bags.

Inspired by the bag ban that was passed in late March in San Francisco, the first city in the country to put an actual ban on plastic bags, Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams has posted an informal poll on his website to gauge public opinion on the use of plastic bags in places such as grocery stores.

The commissioner's office is currently researching what the impact would be of either banning the use of plastic bags or imposing a tax on the use of each plastic bag in Portland. Megan Pollack, a junior at Portland State and an environment policy staff associate with the commissioner's office, has played a major role in researching plastic bag consumption and use in Portland.

Pollack and her colleague Shoshanna Oppenheim have been busy collecting information on the impact of disposable bag use in the United States, as well as in other countries. Pollack said that the commissioner's office is in the "information-gathering stage" of policy making.

"Reducing consumption would have, of course, huge environmental results," Pollack said. "Billions of these bags are given away daily. They are one of the biggest, heaviest sources of litter and made from toxic petroleum that takes thousands of years to biodegrade."

Those who visit the site can look up information and statistics on bag consumption and then can voice their opinion by selecting one of four possible solutions: stick to the way things are, ask retailers to ramp up voluntary efforts, enact a ban and only allow the use of biodegradable plastic bags, or allow the use of plastic and paper but impose a tax on them to use the proceeds for environmental works and reducing bag use.

In Ireland, supermarkets have a 19-cent tax per plastic bag, which reduced bag consumption by 90 percent. Other places, such as Paris, Taiwan, Bangladesh and South Africa, Pollack said, have been quick to follow this process.

Lawmakers in San Francisco were unsuccessful in an attempt to implement a 17-cent charge for each plastic bag. The city eventually passed a ban on all plastic bags that were not biodegradable.

According to reports from CNN, San Francisco shoppers will soon be forced to use only paper sacks or their own bags from home.

In the preliminary discussions with local supermarkets and chains, Pollack said the commissioner's office has found the majority of merchants receptive and interested in change, yet reserved about possible financial outcomes of taxing or banning bags.

Plastic bags have long been provided for customer convenience in many grocery chains. Gabe, the manager at the downtown Safeway, who asked that his last name remain anonymous, estimated that the plastic bags cost between five and seven cents and that his store goes through about 20 boxes of bags a day.

"Many of our shoppers have a plastic preference, usually double plastic, because they walk and plastic is stronger than paper, especially in the rain," he said.

Although plastic is popular in Portland, many stores offer canvas bags that customers can purchase and receive credit for using.

The blog on Adams' website (www.commissionersam.com) contains questions and comments from nearly 200 Portlanders about the plastic bag issue.

<http://media.www.dailyvanguard.com/media/storage/paper941/news/2007/04/20/News/Commissioner.Researching.Plastic.Bag.Ban-2870788-page1.shtml>