



The Bag Tax is Coming

Is a charge of five cents really revolutionary?

Back in November, when word first got out that Mayor Bloomberg would be proposing a tax on plastic grocery bags, we wondered if the city would realize it might be worth it to stick it to retailers, too.

And yes, it did - The plastic bag tax, which was officially proposed last week, will cover plastic bags of any kind - even at restaurants and department stores like Macy's - which will cost shoppers five cents per bag unless they're armed with their own stash of totes (or, presumably, plastic bags they've saved from prior trips).

So, if you want to step into H&M for some unplanned shopping after work, you'll have to be ready unless you want to pay up (obviously this is easier if you drive everywhere, but city dwellers

might find the idea of having to have a bag with you wherever you go pretty annoying).

But we're wondering - Is a charge of five cents really revolutionary? Would you really say to yourself, "Oh man, a nickel? Let me go back five blocks to my apartment and get my tote from its spot on the door handle - This trip could cost me fifteen cents total!"

Do you think Mayor Bloomberg's bag tax will really stop people from using plastic bags? Or will the tax just raise tons of money for the city, without any real environmental effects? Or, in a dramatic plot twist, will retailers simply offer shoppers paper bags instead, rendering the Mayor's money-raising effort useless?



A rising number of governments and retailers are banning plastic bags, or discouraging their use, because of concerns about their environmental impact. San Francisco banned plastic bags last year unless they are of a type that breaks down easily. China announced a crackdown on plastic bags a few weeks ago, while other governments, including New York City's, are making sure retailers offer plastic bag recycling.

Whole Foods officials said they had hoped to eliminate plastic bags for some time but had to decide how to make it work in the chain's 270 stores.

A. C. Gallo, the company's co-president and chief operating officer, said Whole Foods tried to get customers to buy reusable bags for several years but "it really never caught on." That changed when the grocery chain began offering reusable bags for 99 cents, he said.

In addition, he said, Whole Foods was given a test run of sorts when San Francisco banned plastic bags last year. The number of paper bags used in the San Francisco stores increased a mere 10 percent, he said, suggesting that some customers switched to reusable bags.

Two other trial runs, in Toronto and in Austin, Tex., also went well enough that Whole Foods executives felt confident broadening the plastic bag ban to all its stores. It will take effect by April 22, Earth Day.

Whole Foods officials estimate that the store distributes 150 million plastic bags a year.

"The fact of plastic bags is they are not something that has been around forever," said Michael Besancon, a regional president of Whole Foods and the leader of an environmental task force. "It was paper for many, many years. It's not really a hardship."



“They also do not break down easily in a landfill.”

Plastic bags have become ubiquitous because they are lightweight, cheap and functional. Critics complain that the bags are bad for the environment because they are made from petroleum, are typically tossed after one use, fill landfills, and float into trees, rooftops, roadways and oceans.

An industry organization called the Progressive Bag Alliance, however, counters on its Web site that plastic bags take less energy to produce than paper bags and generate less waste, a position backed by at least one study of the issue. The group also argues that virtually nothing decomposes in modern landfills, including paper and plastic. The Whole Foods decision is "a bold move, without a doubt," said Allen Hershkowitz, director of the municipal waste program at the Natural Resources Defense Council. He noted that Americans use 50 billion to 80 billion plastic bags a year.

He acknowledged that paper bags can also harm the environment. But he described Whole Foods Market's use of bags made from recycled paper as an environmental "winner."

Whole Foods is a relatively small retailer, but has been influential in the grocery business. Major grocery chains have copied Whole Foods by sprucing up produce sections and offering a wider variety of natural and organic products. The company's move may prompt other chains to take a look at the bag issue.

Tara Raddohl, a spokeswoman for Wal-Mart, said her company began selling reusable bags in October and was looking to achieve a goal of zero waste.

"Generally speaking, many of our retail competitors as well as ourselves are looking at these options, and how feasible this is, and how this will be received by the consumer," she said.



“A tax on plastic shopping bags would be regressive, with the most severe impacts on those who are least able to absorb them,” said Keith Christman, senior director of packaging for the American Chemistry Council, a manufacturers’ lobby. “There are better ways to protect the environment, to encourage sustainable choices and to support recycling without making it harder for those who are already struggling to make ends meet in a difficult economy.”



Some residents, meanwhile, complained that the timing of the plan could not have been any worse, given that the mayor recently announced plans to raise property taxes earlier than expected, cut financing for a host of programs and possibly raise the sales or income tax.



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“We’re paying taxes on everything else; why not bags, right?” Juana Perez, 25, of East Harlem, said with a sigh. “How many other taxes is he going to raise?”

“These people,” she continued, indicating the neighborhood at large, “they already pay so much for rent and food.”

“New York City,” she said, shaking her head.

