



City of Ann Arbor FAQ Discussion on Disposable Bags

City of Ann Arbor officials are considering policies to reduce the litter and waste from disposable shopping bags and encourage consumers to choose reusable shopping bags. The public is invited to provide input on a range of possible local policies through online surveys and business focus group sessions.

Plastic shopping bags did not exist 30 years ago. Today the typical American consumer uses over ten bags per week. Bags have become a concern to some of the public because bags contribute to local litter and are not easily recycled except at special drop-off sites. On a more global level, plastic consumer debris damages river and ocean ecology and requires expensive cleanup efforts. Plastic bags labeled "compostable" are not easily biodegradable in litter situations and will contaminate efforts to recycle conventional plastic grocery bags. Paper bags, although they are easily recyclable and will decompose over time, still require fuel to manufacture and transport and encourage one-time use. Promoting the use of reusable bags will help reduce consumer "carbon footprints."

1. What is being proposed?

City of Ann Arbor officials are considering a range of policies that will reduce litter and waste from disposable shopping bags and encourage consumers to choose reusable shopping bags.

An ordinance has been drafted to address this topic as follows:

- (1) No affected retail establishment shall provide plastic carry-out bags to its customers at the point of sale.
- (2) Nothing in this section shall be read to preclude affected retail establishments from making reusable bags, compostable bags, recyclable paper bags, and compostable plastic bags for sale or for free to customers

As the ordinance is written currently, stores with \$1 million annual sales or more would be affected.

No single policy has been chosen and resident and business feedback will be important to determining the final shape of any policy. A policy may include any of the following, possibly in combination: a ban on certain types of disposable shopping bags, a small fee for the use of disposable shopping bags, and a rebate for consumers who bring and use their own reusable shopping bags.

2. Has a similar program been adopted anywhere else in the United States?

Yes. San Francisco, CA was the first United States city to ban non-compostable plastic bags in 2007. Since then, many cities and states have considered similar policies as well as policies including a fee for disposable bags. Seattle, WA is attempting to enact a "Green Fee" for all disposable shopping bags, paper and plastic. This 20 cent fee will be up for a vote in August 2009. This advanced recovery fee model is the preferred method for limiting bag use in many European countries, including Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany. Worldwide, plastic bags have been banned in China, South Africa, Mumbai, India, and a variety of other locations.

3. Would all stores be included?

At this time, no choice has been made about the scope of this policy. Retail businesses such as grocery, drug, general retail and clothing stores could be included in a disposable bag policy in addition to restaurants. Only bags provided to consumers at the point-of-sale are in question, which excludes produce bags and dry-cleaner bags. Only retailers located within the corporate city limits of Ann Arbor will be subject to any policy passed by the city.

4. How many disposable bags are currently used in Ann Arbor?

Nationwide, the annual per-capita use of disposable bags is between 300 and 600, or 6-11 per week. Based on these statistics, provided by the US Environmental Protection Agency, Ann Arbor's 114,000 residents can be estimated to use between from 34 million bags per year to 68 million.

5. Does plastic bag recycling help with this issue?

Clean plastic film bags can be collected and recycled domestically into items such as composite lumber. Some plastic film is also shipped overseas where it can be made into a variety of products. Plastic bags are collected at large grocery stores in Ann Arbor and at the Drop-Off Station, but are not currently recyclable in the City of Ann Arbor's curbside program. The United States EPA estimates that between 1% and 3% of plastic shopping bags is recycled annually. The rest of the bags are disposed of as trash or become litter.

6. Are paper bags the better choice?

An in-depth report conducted by the city of Seattle found that in all categories except litter and marine litter, paper bags are environmentally worse bag-for-bag than plastic. Since they are heavier and bulkier, paper bags require more fuel to manufacture and transport in addition to requiring trees to produce. After use, paper bags have fewer lasting environmental effects than plastic. Paper bags are less likely to become litter because they are heavier than plastic, and they have a higher recycling rate nationwide (21%) than plastic (1-3%). If a paper bag does become litter, it will biodegrade over time on land or in a marine environment. Plastic bags, including bio-based types, do not readily biodegrade in water or landfill conditions. Plastics have an estimated lifespan of around 1,000 years, meaning that not one piece of plastic has ever naturally biodegraded.

There is significant debate which type of bag is "worse" for the environment, but most people agree that both types of bags have detrimental effects throughout their lives.

7. What effects do plastic bags have on the environment?

Plastic bags can be seen as litter on land and in bodies of water. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that there are 46,000 pieces of plastic litter floating in every square mile of ocean. Plastic bags reportedly are mistaken for food by some marine wildlife and bird, resulting in the death of these animals. In addition, plastic bags littered on land photodegrades over years, resulting in microscopic pieces of plastic that infiltrate and pollute the soil and groundwater long after the plastic film is visible to the eye.

8. What about biodegradable "plastic"?

While biodegradable "plastic" materials such as polylactic acid (PLA) are compostable under certain conditions at controlled commercial composting centers, this material cannot be successfully composted in a home compost pile, nor will it break down quickly in a sealed municipal landfill. Biodegradable plastic can also cause confusion in the recycling of other plastics, because the two materials are nearly identical in appearance. Contamination of petroleum-based plastic recycling with biodegradable plastics can "gum up" recycling equipment and renders contaminated resin worthless. The City of Ann Arbor has a large yard waste collection program but does not yet have a system in place to collect compostable plastic, so biodegradable plastic containers and bags used in this area largely end up in the trash.

Voice your opinion throughout the month of April 2009
at www.a2gov.org/bags or by talking to Katie at 734.794.6000 X 43728.