

Plastic Regulations and Bans

Mariah Abdullah

Background

It seems that the common, general trend amongst cities who have plastic bag bans are that they ban thin, “single-use” plastic bags from being used at checkout at all stores and businesses (with some exceptions), but continue to allow thicker plastic bags that are compliant with standards that allow them to be considered “reusable.” Some cities also charge extra fees for the use of these thicker “reusable” plastic checkout bags, and some cities even enforce charges for the use of paper checkout bags, in an effort to encourage consumers to bring their own reusable fabric shopping bags whenever they shop.

A complete ban on the “single-use” plastic bag has already been implemented in various US cities, including San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Boston, MA; Austin, TX; and Portland, OR; each of which is discussed below.

Plastic Bag Ban

- Seattle, WA
 - Ordinance 123775 (http://clerk.seattle.gov/~archives/Ordinances/Ord_123775.pdf) was passed in 2011; it imposed a 5-cent charge on paper shopping bags in stores and banned stores from providing single-use plastic shopping bags to their customers.
 - However, there were exemptions: compostable plastic bags are allowed to be used for purposes such as with bulk items or to hold vegetables from grocery stores; plastic bags are allowed to be sold in packages for purposes such as lining trash cans; plastic bags are allowed to be used to hold takeout orders from restaurants.
- San Francisco, CA
 - Plastic Bag Reduction Ordinance (http://www.baglaws.com/assets/pdf/california_san_francisco.pdf). A ban on plastic bags was first passed in 2007 (where thin, single-use plastic bags were banned from use in San Francisco grocery stores, but thicker plastic bags deemed “durable” and “reusable” by having the plastic be at least 2.25 mils thick were still allowed) but was amended in 2012 to become stronger and more effective in banning plastic bags from

being available in stores in San Francisco. Now, not only are single-use plastic bags banned from use in San Francisco stores, but further, a 10-cent fee is required even for compliant plastic bags; also, the ban now covers *all* stores in the city, including all food establishments.

- Exemptions that still allow plastic bag use include plastic bags intended to hold produce or bulk food, dry cleaning, and prescription drugs from pharmacies.
- Informative source: <https://1bagatatime.com/learn/guide-bag-bans/bag-ban-san-francisco/>
- Boston, MA
 - As discussed in Boston’s ordinance (http://www.baglaws.com/assets/pdf/massachusetts_boston.pdf), single-use plastic checkout bags are now banned in the city of Boston. Businesses are required to charge 5 cents for any other checkout bags, such as thicker “reusable” plastic bags, any plastic bags that are considered “compostable,” and even any paper bags that have handles (paper checkout bags with no handles are still free).
 - Exemptions for plastic bags that are still allowed include plastic bags that are not considered “checkout” bags, such as those meant to hold “loose” produce or products, laundry and dry-cleaner bags, newspaper bags, and any bags used to package frozen foods.
- Austin, TX
 - Single-Use Carryout Bag Ordinance (https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT15UTRE_CH15-6SOWASE_ART7CABA). This ordinance bans all single-use (thin) plastic bags from being used in stores, and only allows bags that are considered “reusable.” The ban’s definition of a “reusable” bag is any bag made of cloth or machine-washable fabric, as well as very thick plastic bags that are at least 4 mils thick. For any “reusable” plastic bags, the ban also requires that the bags themselves must display visible information that highlights their ability to be reused, so that each consumer is aware of this fact and more likely to reuse the bag, thus reducing waste.
 - Informative source: <https://1bagatatime.com/learn/guide-bag-bans/austin-bag-ban/>

- Portland, OR
 - Ordinance 185737 (<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/422527>) bans single-use plastic bags at checkout for all grocery stores, pharmacies, and retail establishments (including food establishments) that are larger than 10,000 square feet. Plastic bags that are at least 4 mils thick are considered “reusable” and are not covered by the ban. Portland does not require stores to charge a mandatory fee for the use of paper checkout bags or plastic “reusable bags,” although it is allowed as an option.
 - Plastic bags that are intended to hold bulk food items or produce at grocery stores, as well as prescription medications from pharmacies, are still allowed and exempted from the single-use plastic bag ban.

Plastic Bag Fees

An alternate solution to the problems posed by plastic bags is implementing Plastic Bag Fees (as opposed to an outright ban), as discussed in the following article:

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-carryout-bag-fees-are-better-than-plastic-bag-bans_us_588187ace4b08f5134b61f79.

Fees or taxes on the use of plastic bags has already been implemented in various cities, in which customers are charged around 5-10 cents if they would like to “buy” a plastic bag to use to take home their purchase. While one drawback of a plastic bag fee as opposed to a ban is that it is harder to implement, it has still been shown to be effective in its overall results in reducing the amount of plastic consumed by customers in areas where plastic bag fees have been implemented.

Currently, it is significant to note that plastic bags aren’t necessarily *free*; their cost, about 5 cents, is actually *hidden* in the price of the food and products sold at the stores that carry plastic bags for free at checkout. If this hidden cost of plastic bags was uncovered, and charged as an extra fee only to each consumer if they *chose* to use a plastic bag to carry out their purchases, then not only would the use of plastic bags by consumers undoubtedly decrease significantly—thus helping to reduce plastic waste in the environment—but the price of products at stores could

actually become *cheaper* due to the hidden plastic bag cost being removed/optional to consumers; this would be a benefit to consumers.

- Washington, DC
 - Plastic bag fees have already been proven to be effective in regards to reducing the amount of plastic bags that are used and thrown away in a given area; in Washington, DC, since the implementation of a plastic bag tax, “there’s been an 85% reduction in plastic bag consumption. Before the ban, DC locals consumed 22.5 million bags per month. That number has now dropped to 3.3 million bags per month.” (source: <https://www.earthday.org/2018/04/20/10-cities-and-countries-confronting-plastic-bag-pollution-head-on/>).
- England
 - In England, a tax on plastic bags has proven to be highly effective in reducing the overall amount of plastic bags used and wasted by consumers. By requiring all businesses to impose a 5 pence additional charge on customers who decide to use a plastic bag, the amount of plastic bag usage in England has drastically decreased by 85%—from 7 billion bags handed out to customers yearly to 500 million (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/30/england-plastic-bag-usage-drops-85-per-cent-since-5p-charged-introduced>).

Single-Use Plastics Bans

Plastic bags themselves are not the only form of threat that plastic poses to the environment; single-use plastic products such as straws, utensils, cups, bottles, plates, and more are also beginning to be banned in areas around the world as their harm to the environment becomes imminent. (source: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/plastic-bans-around-the-world/>).

- Taiwan
 - Taiwan has announced that, by 2030, it plans to completely restrict ALL usage of not only single-use plastic bags, but also of single-use plastic products such as straws, cups, bottles, and utensils. Such a ban will be implemented in phases; the first phase, in 2019, is a ban on chain restaurants from using single-use plastic straws, followed by a ban on all restaurants from using the straws in 2020. By

2020, businesses (such as retail and grocery stores) will be charged for providing free plastic bags or utensils. Additional fees will be imposed on businesses still using these single-use plastic products by 2025. Finally, by 2030, a complete ban will be in effect against all single-use plastic products; no businesses will be allowed to use them or distribute them to customers.

- Malibu, CA
 - In 2018, the city of Malibu, CA enacted a complete ban against the sale and use of single-use plastic products, such as straws and cutlery, in order to prevent these common pollutants from ending up in the ocean.
- Seattle, WA
 - In an effort to reduce the amount of plastic waste that ends up in landfills and pollutes the environment, the city of Seattle, WA has completely banned single-use plastic utensils and straws; restaurants, cafés, and other businesses located in Seattle are no longer allowed to use such products or give them to customers. Instead, they must use biodegradable, compostable utensils and straws (or straws made of paper).

Recommendation

Another potential idea that comes with imposing fees on plastic bags is that the proceeds from a plastic bag tax can be used for various causes that can help the environment and, in a way, even *offset* the environmental harm that the use of plastic bags can cause. For example, in DC, every 4 out of the 5 cents that a consumer pays for the plastic bag tax goes to the Anacostia River Clean Up and Protection Fund, which is used “to clean and protect the Anacostia and other local waterways,” as well as “to provide reusable bags to residents, fund watershed education projects, and conduct public education campaigns about the impact of trash on the District’s environmental health.” (source: <https://doee.dc.gov/page/bag-law-faqs>).

If this were to be done in Bexley, and the charges on plastic bags did not just go back to the businesses, then the funds collected from a city-wide tax on plastic bags could fund projects and causes such as public education on environmental protection (visit elementary schools and high school, distribute pamphlets to residents, etc.), environmental cleanups (where/if needed), etc. Proceeds from a plastic bag tax could possibly fund other projects unrelated to plastic that

could still make Bexley greener and more sustainable. Three ways that these potential funds could be effectively used to make Bexley more environmentally-friendly could be the following:

1. Using the collected fees to pay for the extra costs associated with organic, all-natural, chemical-free lawn treatment (such as the use of herbicides or fertilizer) to make all public areas of Bexley that are generally treated by lawn care chemicals become chemical-free and safer for residents.
2. Using the collected fees to pay for the installation of solar-energy panels on public buildings in Bexley to reduce Bexley's electricity demand, which then creates demand for coal (the main source of electricity in Ohio). Solar energy would be a greener alternative, and the costs could be partially or fully covered by funding collected by a plastic checkout bag "tax" from businesses in Bexley.
3. Offset the cost of composting food waste. When food waste is composted instead of thrown away, it diverts unnecessary waste from taking up space in landfills, as well as providing nutrient-rich fertilizer that can be applied to the soil. While the composting of food scraps into fertilizer can be considered costly, this would not be a problem if such costs were covered by the extra funds generated by a plastic bag fee.

In addition to the implementation of a tax on plastic bags, Bexley should also phase in a complete ban on other single-use plastic products, such as straws, bottles, and utensils.

This could be done in three phases:

1. Initially, businesses who use single-use plastic products (such as cafés, bakeries, and restaurants) should be encouraged by the city of Bexley to make use of more sustainable substitutes of each product. The city of Bexley could hire an expert to conduct some research and determine the best substitute for each type of product—such as alternative types of straws to replace single-use plastic straws.
2. Next, the city of Bexley should implement a tax on single-use plastic products, but not ban them completely yet, as the businesses and residents will still be adjusting to the changes. The tax could be similar to the taxes imposed on single-use plastic bags; if a customer at a coffee shop, for example, wants a plastic straw with their purchase (instead of the free sustainable, plastic-free option offered by the businesses), then

they must pay a few cents extra. Such a tax should effectively decrease the amount of single-use plastic products used by the public.

3. Finally, the city of Bexley should implement a complete ban on single-use plastic products, so that businesses in Bexley are no longer allowed to use them and are required (not just simply encouraged, as they would have been before) to utilize plastic-free alternative options instead.