
Lawmakers to reconsider bill proposing plastic-bag charge

New measure applies to all retailers, lowers fee to 10 cents

By The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — A legislator from Leeds is recycling a failed proposal to charge Mainers for plastic bags used to wrap their purchases. But the latest version lowers the proposed fee from 20 cents to a dime a bag and applies to all retailers, not just grocers.

Democrat John Nutting said his proposal is designed to accelerate the switch to reusable bags and keep plastic out of the state's environment and landfills.

"Even if these bags are corn-based and may eventually biodegrade, they're taking up valuable landfill space," he said.

Although the earlier bill introduced just over a year ago never got to a vote, it prompted Maine supermarket chains to increase their promotion of reusable bags.

Money collected under Nutting's bill would be earmarked for a state fund that has been used to promote recycling efforts.

In other states where similar plastic-bag fees have been proposed, legislatures so far have opted for more voluntary approaches or recycling laws. Fees are charged in other countries, including Ireland, where a 33-cent-a-bag fee is credited with cutting use of disposable bags by more than 90 percent as of last year.

Some advocates estimate that as many as 15 percent of Mainers now bring their own bags to grocery stores, up from perhaps 5 percent a few years earlier. Nutting maintains that shoppers could do a lot better with a little encouragement.

Maine retailers, however, say the legislation could lead to disruptions and delays in checkout lines, and that voluntary promotions that encourage the use of reusable bags are a better solution.

"We've sold about 2 million reusable bags since we started offering them about two years ago," said Judy Chong, spokeswoman for Shaw's Supermarkets, referring to the company's stores throughout New England.

Hannaford Bros. had been offering a 5-cent-a-bag credit to customers who brought their own bags, although that practice ended last week, said Michael Norton, a company spokesman. He said the nickel wasn't driving participation anymore.

"We feel like we're not giving them a real large incentive," he said. "Throughout the year, I think you'll see us do some more pragmatic things."

When asked about the 10-cent fee proposal, Maine shoppers had mixed feelings. Many said they already use reusable bags, but others said they like to get some disposable plastic ones that can be used to line trash baskets, clean cat litter or dispose of dog droppings.

"I would have to buy other disposable bags if I didn't have these," said Richard Shilling of Portland.

The Maine Merchants Association has taken no position on the bill, but its executive director questioned the need for it.

“I think the Legislature needs to understand what’s currently going on in the industry,” Curtis Picard said. “There’s a lot of shifting in customer behavior that’s already happening.”

Nutting’s bill goes to a public hearing Feb. 24 before the Legislature’s Natural Resources Committee.

