

Battle of the (bag) bans

Bellingham ponders becoming the second city in Washington to outlaw plastic shopping bags.

By Bob Simmons

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A measure of how seriously Bellinghamsters consider their city's environmental policies: When *The Bellingham Herald* first reported on a proposed ordinance to ban single-use plastic shopping bags a few days ago, 343 readers had something spirited to say about it. That's in a newspaper with a weekday circulation of 20,000. The number of responses may not be a record, says online editor Jim Donaldson, "but it's right up there in the top four or five" among *Herald* stories that have opened up the comment stream.

If the Bellingham City Council approves Councilmember Seth Fleetwood's proposed ordinance, Bellingham will become the second city in Washington to ban the distribution of single-use plastic shopping bags by grocers and other retailers. (Edmonds adopted its own ban in 2009).

Fleetwood filed the draft ordinance at the City Council office earlier this month ([read it here](#)).

"I think people who understand the ordinance will support it," he said. "It's a common-sense rule to meet a serious environmental problem. We're fouling our oceans and the Puget Sound landscape with a very damaging throwaway product that we really don't need."

Now the big Bellingham bag-ban battle begins with a newly formed organization, "Bag It, Bellingham," in collaboration with the Associated Students Environmental Center at Western Washington University. Organizers Jill MacIntyre Witt and Brooks Anderson were moved by concerns for the Pacific's troubled marine life, plagued by a floating plastic garbage dump twice the size of Texas, and by increasing plastic-dominated pollution of the Puget Sound waters and landscape. Now that Bellingham has gathered national attention for its environmental awareness and its hundreds of thriving small, green businesses, MacIntyre Witt says it's time "to join a national and world movement to ban single-use plastic bags in retail commerce."

It isn't just that Bellingham shoppers dispose of an estimated 22 million plastic bags each year; Bag It Bellingham envisions a growing movement beyond the Bay, at the state and regional level.

The proposed ordinance has drawn support from the Northwest Grocery Association, a trade group of large chain stores such as Fred Meyer, Safeway, and Albertson's. The NWGA's president, Joe Gilliam, offered this on the new organization's website: "The core principles of the draft ordinance bring forth some very promising ideas," he said. "The NWGA applauds the efforts of Bag it Bellingham and the concept they are putting forth."

Not so the dominant grocery company in Bellingham, Haggen Food Inc., a privately owned company with 30 Haggen's and Top Food stores in Washington and Oregon. Haggen's of Bellingham had not gone public with its stand on the bag ordinance as of mid-March. But Haggen spokeswoman Becky Skaggs referred questions to the Washington Food Industry Association. And WFIA President Jan Gee says her association strongly opposes local governments banning plastic bags.

"This sort of thing should be done statewide," Gee said. "We don't want our member stores to have to meet one set of restrictions in one city and a different set in another."

Sure, a statewide ban on throwaway bags would be desirable, MacIntyre Witt says. "I'd like a statewide ban too," she told Crosscut, "but we all know that won't happen until cities begin passing it."

The Bellingham proposal differs sharply from the ordinance that stirred so much political anger in Seattle a couple of years ago. Seattle voters rejected a 20-cent fee on plastic and paper bags in 2009, after the American Chemistry Council, representing the plastic bag industry, spent \$1.4 million to bankroll a referendum against it.

The Bellingham draft ordinance closely resembles a proposed statewide law being debated by the Oregon legislature. In addition to banning plastic bags, it would require retailers to collect 5 cents per paper shopping bag to cover the cost of providing them. You avoid paying the nickel when you bring your own shopping bag. The ordinance would not affect plastic meat and produce bags, or bags containing prepared takeout food.

Fleetwood says he hopes citizens will become informed about the ordinance before choosing sides. That may be too much to ask. One of the more vociferous of the *Herald's* comment writers took aim at the nickel fee, wrongly describing it as a tax and a new revenue source for the city. *The Herald* corrected the misleading letter the same day and pointed out that the nickel goes to the retailer, not to the city.

In Edmonds, resistance to the bag ban seems to have faded in the 10 months since the City Council approved it on a 5-to-1 vote. Its lead sponsor, Councilmember Strom Peterson, said, "We may get an email every two months or so objecting to it. But overall we're very pleased with the public reaction. It's been a much easier process than I thought it would be."

Edmonds took its time in enforcing its ordinance, providing what Peterson called "an extended implementation period" during which no one was cited for providing the prohibited bags, while the city worked with retailers to make compliance as easy as possible. "We also spent a lot of time with the unions involved," Peterson said. "Their members are the ones up front, hearing the resistance if there is any, and they understood and supported what we were trying to accomplish."

Edmonds is generally viewed as a conservative community that might have been expected to oppose government action of this kind, yet it avoided the political furor that defined Seattle's reaction. Bellingham is twice the size of Edmonds and widely seen as more politically liberal.

But when it comes to a plague of plastic, Peterson thinks the two cities have a lot in common. "The Sound is so very important to both communities. We both have strong environmental concerns, and depend heavily on a healthy Puget Sound and ocean."

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