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In Mayor's Plan, the Plastic Bag Will Carry a Fee

By [DAVID W. CHEN](#)

In its struggle to make New York more green, the Bloomberg administration has tried discouraging people from using plastic bags. It has taken out ads beseeching residents to use cloth bags and set up recycling bins for plastic bags at supermarkets.

But now the carrots have been put away, and the stick is out: Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) has called for charging shoppers 6 cents for every plastic bag needed at the register.

If the proposal passes, New York City would follow the lead of many European countries and become one of the first places in the United States to assess a so-called plastic bag tax.

Seattle voters will weigh in on a similar measure next year, and other places, like Los Angeles and Dallas, have studied the idea.

City officials estimate that the fee could generate \$16 million a year, a figure that Mr. Bloomberg would no doubt appreciate, given the lingering and concussive effects of the global economic crisis on the city's economy.

But while the fee would burnish Mr. Bloomberg's environmental record, it might not be a lasting source of revenue. Just a few weeks after Ireland adopted a similar, though much heftier tax in 2002 — charging shoppers 33 cents a bag — plastic bag use dropped 94 percent, and within a year, nearly everyone in that country had purchased reusable cloth bags. Still, the mayor believes that the 6-cent fee would have a major impact on consumers' behavior.

Environmentalists like the sound of Mr. Bloomberg's idea. But from the corner deli to the high-end grocery store, other New Yorkers are not so sure.

At the 2000 N.Y. Deli on Second Avenue at 103rd Street in East Harlem, the owner, Sammy Ali, 30, said his customers would balk at paying for plastic. "No way," Mr. Ali said on Thursday. "They ask us for plastic bags for free as it is. When we say no, they curse us out. They demand a bag for a 25-cent bag of chips."

At Citarella on the Upper West Side, a customer, Anita Ramautar, said she would begrudgingly change her behavior, if only to deny the city the pleasure of collecting the money. "I'll bring my own bag," she said. "Why would I give them 5 cents?"

Ah, but remembering to bring that bag is another matter altogether. After all, New York is a place where

people are almost programmed to do things impulsively, because it is so easy to just hop into a bodega or a deli or a 99-cent store to buy anything, anytime, no forethought required.

“You have to get used to using these,” said Lauren Robertson, 54, an occupational therapist who lives in Washington Heights, who was loading groceries in canvas bags into her car in the Fairway parking lot on 130th Street near the Hudson River on Thursday morning. “So many times I’d get into the store and realize I forgot my bags in the car.”

Bloomberg officials say the proposal remains a work in progress. But for now, the plan is to charge customers 6 cents a bag at the point of sale, with 1 cent going to the store owner as an incentive to comply, said Marc La Vorgna, a Bloomberg spokesman. The officials did not elaborate on the mechanics of how the money would be remitted to the city, or how the law would be enforced.

It sounds like a tax, but officials call it a fee. The distinction is important: A fee requires approval only from the City Council, while a tax requires approval from the State Legislature.

Unlike a number of ideas that seem to have been inspired by experiments in other countries (such as exploring wind power, based on windmills which Mr. Bloomberg saw off the coast of England, or temporarily closing off streets to cars, based on a program in Bogotá, Colombia, that the mayor had heard about), this one, city officials say, was hatched in the mayor’s Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability.

The idea is not totally foreign to the metropolitan area. The [Ikea](#) furniture chain, which opened its first New York City store in June, on the Brooklyn waterfront in Red Hook, began charging customers 5 cents for each plastic bag in 2007; since then, the store says, plastic bag use has been cut in half. Several large supermarket chains in the region, like Whole Foods Markets, offer refunds when customers bring reusable bags.

Eric A. Goldstein, a senior lawyer with the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), said that he was encouraged by the idea.

“It’s simple, it’s streamlined, it advances environmental objectives and it generates some funds,” he said.

And one environmentally conscious resident who applauded the idea was Richard Marshall, a retired opera director, who was shopping outside a Key Food supermarket in Astoria, Queens, on Thursday.

“I think Bloomberg should start charging a dollar a bag,” he said, clutching two reusable bags. “All this waste. All these millions and millions of bags. They don’t decompose, and they use all this oil to make them.”

Several City Council members said they were intrigued, but needed to see more details. Several did note, however, that it was only a few months ago that the Council passed — with the help of environmentalists and plastic bag manufacturers — a law requiring all stores that provide plastic bags to accept plastic bags for recycling, with some exceptions. And during the lengthy public debate over that bill, council members heard speakers testify that fees of at least 25 cents a bag needed to be imposed to get consumers to change their behavior.

Another concern is whether the tax would hurt poor residents, as well as small businesses, disproportionately — a concern mentioned by council members, environmentalists and manufacturers alike.

“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.

“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.

Jennifer Mascia and Mick Meenan contributed reporting.

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