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## And they said it wouldn't catch on

By CBC News  
CBC News

*Toronto's plastic-bag tax is a year old and an environmental success.*

Toronto resident Lynn Duncan brings a handful of black reusable bags to the grocery store every Saturday. For the mother of two boys, it's not a big deal. It's something that she's been doing for a year now.

"I know plastic bags are wasteful and hurtful to the environment," she says. "They are not biodegradable. I think it's a small thing I can do to cut down on waste."

Duncan, a controller at a marketing company, says she has no intention of paying five cents for every plastic bag she uses when carting groceries home, as the law here now demands.

"It does add up," she says. "You can't help but feel punished if you forgot your bags and you have to pay the five cents."

Controversial when it was first implemented, Toronto's plastic bag bylaw, the first and only one of its kind in any large Canadian city, marked its first anniversary this week.

Under the bylaw, Toronto retailers are required to charge a nickel for every single-use plastic retail shopping bag requested by customers.

Borrowing a phrase from Ireland, which was one of the first jurisdictions to introduce a tax on plastic bags in 2002, Toronto officials say the city's move has given consumers "pause for thought."

### A noticeable drop

At this point, no one can precisely track how many plastic bags have been sold in Toronto in the past year, nor how the revenue generated by these sales is being spent.

The bylaw contains no reporting or accounting provisions. The city simply "encourages" stores to spend the revenue on environmental or community initiatives.

Still, the bylaw "has been wildly successful, beyond our expectations," says Glenn De Baeremaeker, the councillor who chairs the city's public works and infrastructure committee.

"Our goal was to reduce the amount of plastic being consumed and we succeeded at that."

Indeed, two of the largest grocery chains in the region report that they are distributing far fewer plastic bags than they did before the bylaw was enacted.

In fact, in Ontario alone, Metro says its distribution rate has fallen between 70 and 80 per cent, while Sobeys has dropped 72 per cent.

For its part, Loblaws had already begun to charge five cents for bags in Toronto in January 2009 and in the rest of the country in April 2009. It reports that its national plastic bag distribution dropped 55 per cent in 2009 and that it diverted 1.3 billion plastic bags from landfill sites in 2009.

Mark Badger, president of the Canadian Plastics Industry Association, which represents more than 3,300 companies, says there has been a "noticeable" drop in demand for production of plastic bags in Ontario since the bylaw took effect.

### Industry's turn

Environmental groups say they are supportive of the bylaw even though they would have preferred an outright ban on plastic shopping bags.

Heather Marshall, a campaigner for the Toronto Environmental Alliance, a non-profit group, said Toronto should "get an A for effort" for trying to cut down on this kind of waste.

"It's not easy for a city to say 'We are going to stand up and we are going to charge people for this,'" Marshall allows.

"People have criticized it as a tax. But the city is doing the best it can to change behaviour."

Marshall says it is now up to the province to do more to place the burden of solid waste management on the companies that produce it in the first place.

Ontario is hoping to bring in legislation later this year to do just that, an official with the provincial environment ministry said.

### In-store packaging

Under the Toronto bylaw, retailers must provide customers with free recyclable alternatives to plastic shopping bags, such as cardboard boxes or paper bags. They must also allow customers to bring their own "reusable container" and must post signs about the charge.

The five-cent charge does not apply to produce bags, not to bags used to wrap meat, fish, frozen foods, plants, bakery products or prepared foods. Bags for prescription drugs, dry-cleaning and newspapers are also exempt.

Under a second part of the bylaw that came into effect on June 1, 2010, retailers are prohibited from offering plastic bags to customers that are not compatible with the city's blue bin recycling program.

The rules are part of a larger strategy to reduce what the city calls "in-store packaging waste," a category that includes hot drink cups and plastic takeout food containers. The overall goal is 70 per cent waste diversion by 2012.

### Voluntary program

One of very few North American cities to go the strict bylaw route, Toronto's anti-bag initiative is difficult to assess.

### Plastic bag facts

Canadians take home over 55 million plastic shopping bags every week and three-quarters of these end up in landfills.

Plastic bags are made from petroleum or natural gas and while many contain the familiar chasing arrows symbol and a number, this does not mean they are recyclable. It only refers to the type of plastic or resin.

Plastic bags don't decompose, they photodegrade, through sunlight, into little pieces, a process that can take decades.

The first plastic bag, for sandwiches, was said to be made in 1957.

The first plastic-bag tax was introduced in Denmark in 1994.

*Sources: Environment Canada, news reports*

In part, that is because Ontario retailers, through a voluntary agreement reached with the province in 2007, had already begun to reduce the number the bags they distribute.

The Ontario Plastic Bag Reduction Task Group, a partnership of five large organizations, set a goal of 50 per cent reduction by 2012.

That would be a reduction from the approximately four billion plastic bags that Ontario stores distributed in 2006, according to the group's first annual report. By comparison, the U.S. retailers goes through 100 billion plastic bags a year, one survey found.

Metro, the grocery chain with 62 stores in the Greater Toronto area, said it used to distribute 250 million plastic bags per year in Ontario before it began to charge for bags. In the first four weeks of the bylaw, the number of bags it distributed in Ontario dropped 70 per cent.

Metro has been charging five cents per bag at its stores in Ontario and Quebec since June 1, 2009 and as a result has committed \$2 million to the Green Apple School program, which encourages healthy eating habits.

Sobeys Ontario is using its plastic-bag revenue to support 22 local organizations through an Earth Day Canada Community Environment Fund.

"We have clearly seen a dramatic decline in the use of plastic bags," says Tracy Chisholm, Sobeys Ontario's director of communications. "We are very pleased with the results we have seen."

## Changing behaviour

De Baeremaeker said he thinks the bylaw is successful because the city sought the input of retailers.

"The retailers said to us, a charge is going to be the most effective way to reduce bag usage. You charge people money and you change their behaviour," he said. "We thought an outright ban was too drastic."

As for unintended consequences, such as the impact on jobs, De Baeremaeker said he has yet to see any credible data on that. The Canadian Plastics Industry Association could not provide any figures on job losses in the Greater Toronto Area either as a result of the bylaw.

Not everyone, however, is thrilled with the five-cent charge.

"I see it as against the consumer," Lynn Duncan says, even though she has become accustomed to the practice.

"If I had my way, I would make retailers remit something like a royalty fee to the city and the money would be spent on parks and recreation.

"Retailers have a choice. They can spend the proceeds on environmental programs or they can pocket the money. As consumers, we don't have a choice. If you don't grab your bags from home, you have to pay five cents."

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