

[Close this window](#)

[Print this page](#)



Bag the tax

Taxes to support recycling need a broader discussion

Published Sunday, September 27, 2009

Creating a coherent, consistent policy on garbage and recycling in the borough has never been easy. A grocery bag tax, unfortunately, does not help clarify the situation. The borough's recently adopted but not-yet-implemented 5-cent tax on each bag should be repealed.

The bag tax is an honest attempt to reduce litter and temporarily raise some money for an expanded recycling effort, both of which are goals supported by most people in Fairbanks. However, the tax raises too many questions of consistency, inconveniences too many people and targets a relatively minor problem. Ironically, it also could increase rather than decrease the volume of plastic entering the borough's landfill.

The consistency problems are obvious. Why tax the standard grocery bag but not other bags and other forms of plastic? The standard answer, of course, is that grocery bags appear to be the least essential in the wide range of uses to which we put plastic, since people can bring their own, reusable bags to stores. However, that appearance is easily undermined. Plastic bags and plastics could be substituted across the spectrum of daily existence, if people would simply think, plan and execute those plans.

People do not do so because plastic remains a cheaper, better alternative in many cases. So long as such material does not pose a safety, environmental or economic problem, the consumer's interest in its convenience and thrift should prevail in public policy.

Ah, but that's the thing, proponents of the tax might argue. Grocery bags are all of the above in the problem department. Perhaps, but there are serious arguments against such an assertion.

The bags, for starters, are used extensively by most households, giving them solid standing in the mantra often used to judge environmental virtuosity — reduce, reuse, recycle. Such bags do not represent a major part of the litter along our roads. And the bags are polyethylene, a product of natural gas — a clean fossil fuel.

Such bags create an economic cost to all borough taxpayers, in that they take up space in the landfill. However, two points argue against taxing them as a method of recovering that cost.

First, the landfill space occupied by bags is tiny when compared to other materials, and taxing them won't reduce that tiny volume by much. In Ireland, a bag tax, while admittedly much larger than the borough's, tends to make consumers buy new, heavier bags that add to the volume of plastics entering the waste stream. Second, the general landfill fee on all materials is the proper place to collect the cost of the space consumed by garbage deposited there.

Earlier this year, a lengthy discussion of these issues contributed to the voters' overwhelming rejection of a bag tax in Seattle, one of the "greenest" cities in the nation. In Fairbanks, the bag tax had a far shorter round of public discussion. It needs more, and the debate should begin in the clear, without the tax already in law. The bag tax ordinance should be sacked.