

Do you need a bag? Yeah, make it plastic

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It's legislative season in most U.S. state capitals, so we're starting to see a flurry of bills being proposed to tax or ban plastic bags.

From Florida to Oregon, bag restrictions are on the agenda. Legislators who are looking for new sources of revenue, or trying to deal with litter problems, or perhaps just trying to get their names in the paper, are proposing a variety of bills.

First, let's make clear that bans and taxes are a bad idea.

Replacing polyethylene bags with paper or degradable polymers, as called for in some proposals, implies that other materials are environmentally preferable to plastics. That's a matter of opinion, not fact, and it's not clear that legislators are qualified to make that decision. No doubt emotion and factors other than logic will play a role if politicians make decisions on which kinds of packaging get preferential treatment.



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(For proof, check out Brownsville, Texas, which recently became the 12th U.S. city to ban single-use plastic bags. I'm sure it's a total coincidence that Brownsville is home to a paper bag factory that employs 120.)

On top of that, citizens everywhere should object to any plan to place new taxes on products that the majority of people use regularly. Taxes are necessary, but bag taxes are regressive and anti-business.

Given the negatives of bag taxes, it is good news that California legislators recently killed two bills that would have placed a 25-cent tax on single-use plastic and paper carryout bags. Legislators decided that the costs of setting up a system to impose the fee — estimated at \$300,000 — and the annual enforcement cost of \$1 million were not worth the effort, given the state's budget crisis.

But the demise of the two bills in California does not mean proposals to tax or ban bags won't resurface in the state Legislature or in individual cities. So bag makers and their suppliers need to remain committed to dealing with sustainability issues like litter and marine debris.

That means continuing to raise the profile of bag recycling efforts, and staying committed to using more recycled content in bags. Clearly, defeating legislative efforts to ban and tax bags is only winning part of the battle.

All that said, I don't object to non-legislative efforts to get people to cut down on bag consumption. A growing number of retailers are on that bandwagon. Ikea and Whole Foods Market no longer distribute single-use plastic bags. CVS/pharmacy and Target have customer incentive programs designed to reduce plastic bag use. Wal-Mart has an ambitious goal to reduce bag use, and it's trying a number of approaches to see which works best. Three Wal-Mart stores in California recently launched a pilot program in which no single-use plastic bags will be available for shoppers.

In the past 20 years, shoppers have gotten used to checkout clerks asking, "Paper or plastic?" But with retailers trying to cut down on plastic bag usage, consumers should get used to a new phrase at the cash register: "Do you *need* a bag?"

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