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## No to the bag tax

### Our view: Reusing bags is a worthy goal, but a 25-cent fee is the wrong approach

June 18, 2009

It's laudable that the Baltimore City Council wants to encourage residents to cut down on their use of plastic and paper bags at grocery stores, but slapping a 25-cent fee on every bag - possibly the highest levy in the country - isn't the right way to go. It smacks of a tax on the poor in the middle of a recession.

The city should, by all means, find ways to encourage residents to take reusable bags to the grocery store, perhaps by working with merchants to make them readily available at a discount or for free, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods. Whole Foods offers nice reusable bags for a buck or two. Your average corner grocery store in the city? Probably not.

Councilman Bill Henry, the sponsor of the bill, says he deliberately set the proposed levy at an objectionably high level. He figures that with a tax of, say, 5 cents a bag, people would grumble and pay up. At a quarter a pop, people's behavior will be changed, he says. He wants to use part of the proceeds to buy a million or more reusable bags to give to city residents for free (though the bill, as written, doesn't actually require it). At the moment, the money would go into the city's general fund and, from there, could be spent on anything. Mr. Henry says he hopes to take care of that with an amendment. He also says he hopes the city finance department would forward-fund the free bag program so poor residents aren't caught in the lurch.

But even if those improvements are made to the legislation, Baltimore would either be collecting as much as \$6.4 million a year from the bag tax, or - if an entire city's habits changed overnight and everyone religiously employed reusable bags - it would be spending money on this program during a fiscal crisis that has forced deep cuts across the budget.

The only other major U.S. city that has enacted a tax in this range is Seattle, where the mayor and city council approved a 20-cent per bag tax, though it has not taken effect because it is the subject of a voter referendum. Seattle planned to spend \$1.5 million to educate citizens and provide them with reusable bags - one per household and four to six for low income families. It's hard to imagine Baltimore finding that kind of money at a time when the City Council nearly had to precipitate a budget crisis to get the mayor to spend a few hundred thousand dollars to keep recreation centers open.

Baltimore should take steps to reduce the number of disposable bags its residents use. The city should encourage merchants to give a rebate to people who bring their own bags, and officials should amend Baltimore's single-stream recycling program so that it, like some suburban counties, accepts bundles of used plastic bags. The city should also require that all grocery stores have recycling bins for bags.

It is certainly unsightly to see plastic bags blow in the breeze, get caught in tree branches or float through the Inner Harbor. But that's not a good enough reason for Baltimore to lead the nation in enacting what could become a significant and regressive tax increase.



