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Seattle's bag tax is a bad idea without substantive environmental impact

By Peter Nickerson and Randy Rucker
Special to The Times



A few weeks ago, the American Chemistry Council dumped \$300,000 into the anti-bag-tax campaign, bringing their total contributions to more than \$1 million.

Seattleites, ever quick-triggered in their denunciation of anything resembling corporate evil, were understandably aghast. Despite the urge to grab our light sabers and fight this invasion, we will be better served by carefully considering the policy itself and not its corporate opponents. Chemistry Council or not, the bag tax is a bad idea for Seattle.

There is no doubt that the proposed tax (or "fee" in political speak) will decrease the use of paper and plastic grocery bags in Seattle. Virtually all of the other claims about its effects are unsubstantiated or flat-out wrong.

Plastic-bag taxes and bans were designed to help decrease plastic-bag litter in places like China and Ireland. Bag litter is not a Seattle problem. Seattleites are in fact conscientious non-litterers. Last year Forbes ranked Seattle as the country's second-cleanest city. If you need affirmation, walk the streets and parks. There is no bag scourge.

Plastic grocery bags make up a tiny percentage of our landfill waste; likely less than two-tenths of 1 percent. This tax will have a trivial effect on that percentage. This is because many stores are exempt from the program and at the others, some people will accept the fee and continue to use the store-provided bags. The total number of plastic bags distributed by stores will go down by less than half. We are also likely to start buying plastic bags off the shelf, many of heavier weight, to use for all the things we now use the grocery bags for, including garbage, dog pickup, lunches and gym clothes. Ironically, the city is already passing out free plastic doggy pickup bags in city parks and the county is distributing free plastic bags for compost disposal. Though the compost bags are biodegradable, similar grocery bags would not be exempt from the city's bag tax plan.

The tax will have no impact on the number of marine mammal deaths in the Pacific Ocean. Proponents of the tax incorrectly cite a 1987 study that shows that 100,000 marine mammals were killed every year by plastic nets. Many of these nets have already been rightly banned. The study has nothing to do with plastic grocery bags.

The tax will have minuscule impacts on our oil consumption. These bags are produced mostly with domestic natural gas. Even if they were produced with more oil, only 3 percent of oil is used in all plastic production and plastic grocery bags comprise only a small fraction of total plastic produced. The plastic in our iPhones, our running shoes, hiking gear, skis and other toys contain much more oil-based plastic.

This tax is ill-conceived. Neither our city officials nor anyone else knows what its effects will be. The tax will solve no environmental problem. It is probably more regressive than our sales-tax system. It will make some people feel good but will create a significant new taxing bureaucracy. Moreover, it will interrupt and complicate a million grocery

transactions in the city daily.

More important than any of the preceding issues is that the bag tax expends political capital. There are lots of policies that could be implemented to help the environment. Asking consumers to pay a tax that has no real impact will make it harder to enact such programs. Seattleites who really want to help the environment could be riding buses more. They could also be demanding that their legislators implement a national carbon tax and significantly increase gasoline taxes. These actions, though controversial, would at least have real impacts.

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