

# Seven Days Bags a Story the Free Press Wouldn't Touch

Local Matters

By Andy Bromage [10.28.09]

Every Sunday, the [Burlington Free Press](#) [1] peels back the curtain on the stories it's working on for future issues of "[Green Mountain](#)," [2] the paper's weekly environmental news section.

In a small box at the bottom of page two, the *Free Press* runs tantalizing teasers for upcoming articles that promise to tackle the pressing eco-issues of the day: How should we control the problem of cigarette butts? What's really in your drinking water? The editors tell readers to stay tuned for the answers, and even ask for tips on reporting the stories — questions to ask, knowledgeable sources to contact. The Freeps calls that kind of participatory newsgathering the "public budget."

One typical teaser asks the burning question: "They're banned in San Francisco, but plastic bags flutter at nearly every grocery store in Vermont. Who wants to ban bags here, too?"

Good question. But after months of running that preview, the Freeps still hasn't dished the answer. The suspense was killing us — who *does* want to ban plastic bags in Vermont? We decided to find out, already.

As it turns out, the answer is: almost no one. Of the dozen or so environmentalists, politicians and grocers we asked, just one said banning plastic is a good idea. Most are uncomfortable with the idea of government telling consumers they *couldn't* do something — even environmentalists who call plastic bags a "scourge" on the planet.

"Bans are tough," says [VPIRG director](#) [3] Paul Burns, who's spent 20 years fighting the plastic-bag battle but hasn't made it a priority for the public-interest group. "You're taking away a choice and that ends up being a significant issue for consumers," he says.

But lots of people favor a so-called "plastax" — a measure that can be a de facto ban if it taxes plastic bags into extinction. Ireland's 22-cent plastax (around 33 cents per bag U.S.) has cut the use of plastic grocery bags in that country an impressive 90 percent, reports state Rep. [Joey Donovan](#) [4] of Burlington, who just returned from a trip to the Emerald Isle.

"You can imagine how that changes behavior," she says.

Donovan is one of several Vermont politicians getting behind a tax on plastic bags — 17 cents in a House version of the bill, and 3 cents in the Senate version. Her motivation covers familiar ground: Plastic bags harm wildlife and marine mammals, clog landfills, litter the landscape, and never biodegrade — even after 1000 years.

Donovan says it's time to start charging for plastic bags up front, rather than just paying to clean up the mess they make. She says the incentive model — where stores give customers a few cents back for bringing their own bags — isn't changing behavior fast enough.

“A majority of shoppers rely on new bags every time they make a purchase,” she points out.

But what if reusable bags did become the norm — without a plastax *or* a ban?

It's slowly happening at [City Market](#) [5] in Burlington, where general manager Clem Nilan says the cooperative paid out \$14,000 in nickels over the last year to customers who collect a 5-cent refund for each bag they bring in themselves. That's \$3000 more in refunds than City Market paid out the year before.

Nilan would like to ban plastic bags outright, but only if grocers do it all at once.

“I think the whole country using cloth bags is a really good idea, but you can't do it overnight,” says Nilan. “That's going to take a while to get there as a country.”

Mainstream grocery stores are also using fewer plastic bags as customers switch to reusable ones. Shaw's Supermarkets, which has 19 stores in Vermont, sold 1.1 million cloth bags throughout New England in 2008, says spokeswoman Dina Piran. It was a 90 percent increase over the year before.

So far, it appears there's no credible movement to ban plastic in Vermont. There's just a gradual, voluntary shift to reusable bags — a story that sounds about as exciting as, well, a plastic bag.

Maybe that's why the *Free Press* isn't letting the “public” lead on this one?

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.7dvt.com/2009seven-days-bags-story-free-press-wouldnt-touch>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com>

[2] <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=NEWS05>

[3] <http://www.vpirg.org/>

[4] <http://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/programs/joey-donovan-chair-education-committee>

[5] <http://www.citymarket.coop/>