

Switch from plastic bags painful in Metro

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Editor's note: The Times & Transcript has selected the Top News Stories of 2009. The following story is a part of that series, which will culminate with the year's Top 10 News Stories in the New Year's Day edition.

Environmentally sensitive Atlantic Canadians rejoiced when the Real Atlantic Superstore started in 2009 to encourage shoppers to switch to reusable shopping bags by charging five cents per plastic bag.

But while the applause was deafening, shoppers switched over to competitors who do not charge five cents for a plastic bag, and in great enough numbers that the Superstore is now re-evaluating the program.

"Everyone believes it's the right thing to do," says Inge van den Berg, senior vice-president, corporate affairs and investor relations, with Superstore's parent company Loblaw's Co.

"Customers always are in support of the program. They just don't want to incur that extra charge."

Superstore now must decide if the program will continue in the New Year. In the meantime, they're refunding the five cents they normally charge for bags and are offering to return the \$4.95 they charge for green grocery bins when customers return the bin, should they choose to return it. The bins fit snugly into grocery carts at the Superstore, Save-Easy and No Frills outlets, as well as into the trunks and back seats of cars.

Loblaw's rolled out the program last year in a bid to slash the use of plastic by one billion bags. They are now tallying the national and Atlantic-region numbers to gauge the program's success but it has been obvious to them that in Atlantic Canada, some shoppers are taking their grocery lists to other stores that aren't trying to wean consumers off their addiction to plastic.

"We're trying to determine if this is the right approach for Atlantic, and then we have a bit of a tough decision ahead of us," van den Berg says.

A decision will be made very soon.

Options include discontinuing the program outright, tweaking it, embarking on a new initiative or letting it stand as it is and hope customers come to accept it. Extensive studies have shown rebating shoppers for bringing their own bags doesn't work nearly as well as charging a small fee for using a plastic bag.

Superstore officials haven't yet determined why many shoppers who praised the idea at first now refuse to take part in it.