



We ought to bag the plastic bag tax

Some cities have tried to curb the proliferation of what some call "the urban tumbleweed" by charging consumers for plastic bags at the checkout aisle. Commentator Susan Lee says that's not the way to go.

Susan Lee (Susan Lee)

TEXT OF COMMENTARY

Kai Ryssdal: In San Francisco this week, plans are afoot among city officials to expand their ban on plastic shopping bags. Three years ago the city outlawed plastic bags in grocery stores and chain drug stores. The talk now is of extending it to all businesses there. Other cities have tried to control what has been called the "urban tumbleweed" by charging for bags at the checkout aisle.

Commentator Susan Lee says that's not the way to go either.

Susan Lee: I live in New York City, which happens to be the plastic-bag center of the universe. According to one estimate, New Yorkers use over 3 billion bags a year.

Most of these bags are reused as liners for garbage buckets or as pooper-scoopers. But a lot of them just blow around -- and get caught in trees where they hang forever.

Well, a total ban seems a bit extreme. So I was interested when Washington D.C. started taxing bags this year. All grocery and convenience stores now charge five cents per bag -- paper or plastic. Lots of people don't want to pay, so stores use about half as many bags as they did before the tax.

Hoo-Ha, I thought. A bag tax produces a trifecta of good things -- less repulsive litter, less environmental damage and less waste in general.

However, it turns out that I was wrong.

Yes, fewer bags do cut down on repulsive litter. But only on the margin. A huge majority of street litter consists of paper and cigarette butts.

As for the environment -- plastic bags may be better than the alternative. Certainly they're better than paper bags. And those durable, poly-bags require more energy to produce. And unlike flimsy plastic bags, they aren't recyclable.

Same goes for waste. Beyond lining wastebaskets or picking up after pets, plastic bags are deployed as lunch boxes or totes for ancient tennis shoes.

Clearly, the need for some sort of bag won't disappear. Instead, other less energy-efficient bags will be purchased.

According to the Tax Foundation, at least 15 states have bag-tax laws in the pipeline.

It makes me very sad to say this, but we probably ought to bag the bag tax.

Ryssdal: Susan Lee is an economist living, as she said, in New York City. Take a second, no matter where you are, and send us your thoughts.