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S.F.'S 17-CENT SOLUTION

Stop throwing away grocery bags, save millions

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San Francisco's environmental commission is contemplating "an ordinance requiring a 17-cent fee on each bag provided at supermarket checkout counters to reduce the proliferation of unnecessary bags and provide funds to mitigate the negative impacts caused by them." In order to remain calm about the proposed ordinance, one must understand the facts.

At present, retailers purchase plastic bags wholesale for approximately a penny each (at least 3 cents each for paper) -- a cost that is passed on to consumers in the price of each item you purchase. In other words, you're already paying for the bag. It is naive to think of this arrangement as free.

In effect, however, San Franciscans have been paying more than the suggested 17-cent fee for some time, because tax revenue must be spent in dealing with the mountains of bag trash and litter. The costs to the city for cleaning up the mess -- collecting, sorting and disposing, to cite a few charges -- amount to tens of millions of dollars annually, according to the San Francisco Department of the Environment. Cleaning up the bag mess is essentially like throwing that money into the sewer. The 17-cent-per-bag figure is conservative, because the Department of the Environment has not finished adding up all of the costs of dealing with the bags. (My own estimate, based on environmental and health-impact costs, is that a more realistic fee would be 50 cents or more.)

Not included in the reckoning of the 17-cent fee are the direct effects of the bag litter on a wide range of public programs. In addition, there are six times more plastic particles than plankton by weight floating around in the middle of the Pacific; there are two such floating-plastic garbage patches in the Pacific that are each the size of Texas. The plastic fragments collect pollutants, which are biomagnified up the food chain when they are mistaken for planktonic food, according to the Algalita Marine Research Foundation.

The great part of the commission's proposal is that the decision of whether to pay the fee would be up to you. By bringing your own bags, you'd avoid the fee entirely. This requires a change in the way you shop, but it wouldn't take long to get into the habit of bringing reusable bags with you.

The American Plastics Council advises that "This tax is going to hurt those who can least afford it." If the city is unable to recover the cost of dealing with the mountains of plastic bags, however, the money must continue to come through extensive cuts in desirable social, educational and health programs that actually benefit the poor. With a quickly rising deficit of greater than \$325 million, wouldn't the city be better to use all those millions spent on dealing with the litter on useful programs instead? If this fee is passed, it will at least stop the loss of programs caused by the bags.

Why does the plastics industry use such deceptive methods to maintain sales? Just follow the money. In the United States alone, 100 billion plastic bags are used annually. Retailers spend an estimated \$4 billion on their plastic bags, passing the costs on to consumers.

I recently ordered two large canvas bags for about \$29. These two bags quite easily replace four double plastic bags each week when I grocery shop. In just the first year, every San Franciscan could save \$61. But from then on they'd pay no more for bags and save an additional \$90 per year for as long as the bags last. That saves each household about \$871 over 10 years -- the average useful life of the canvas bags.

If all 346,527 households in San Francisco did this, the savings in the first year would be more than \$21 million. For the next nine years, the savings would be almost \$281 million, with a 10-year total of more than \$300 million. That's a lot of money that could otherwise fund some useful public programs.

The San Francisco Department of the Environment has come up with a commendable solution that could be done fairly easily, but some are fighting it tooth and nail. Let's help each other to be winners by seeing the value of this proposal and supporting it strongly.

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