

Mailbag full of bag responses

[Kathleen Pender](#)

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All right, already.

People are passionate about their shopping bags.

Or should I say the environment, government and taxes.

I've gotten more than 70 e-mails responding to my Tuesday column about the San Francisco Commission on the Environment's resolution urging the Board of Supervisors to force supermarkets in the city to charge shoppers 17 cents apiece for bags.

Roughly one-third of these readers love the idea, saying it will cut down on waste and trash. Some say the proposal doesn't go far enough, that fees should apply to other stores and bags.

Roughly one-third hate the idea, saying it's a government plot to raise taxes.

The remaining third might warm to the idea, but have some questions and reservations.

Today, I'll share some of these comments, but after this, please, no more feedback on bag fees.

-- The European scene: More than a dozen e-mails came from people who live or have lived in Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Norway or South Africa, where charging for shopping bags is common. Virtually all of them said it's a minor expense or inconvenience, but well worth it.

"My native Germany charges a fee for these bags, and people respond in the best way for the environment -- they bring their own tote bags! When I came to the U.S. seven years ago, I was astonished (and disgusted) by the practice of using new bags on each trip. And while I have to admit that I easily fell into this behavior myself, the proposed legislation reminded me that bringing my own tote bag is an easy way to be a good citizen of our one and only planet Earth," says Franziska Marks.

"I am an Irish citizen living in S.F. I remember the same excuses being trotted out when this was first introduced in Ireland (in 2002). The key difference is that the retailers embraced this change as a way to tout their 'green' credentials by offering a free, sturdy shopping tote to each club member for a limited time to carry their groceries (enabling free advertising). It really has dramatically reduced the level of plastic bag waste all over the country," writes Ray Walsh.

-- Pooper scoopers: Many readers told me they put their old bags to good use. One even sent me a photo of her kitchen recycling center, rigged to hold plastic bags.

"Everybody I know uses plastic grocery bags for garbage bags. They use them to go to the dog park, empty the kitty litter, and a dozen other things. If you don't get plastic bags with your groceries, then you would have to buy plastic bags. So it sort of defeats the purpose," writes Jim Knowles of Alameda.

"Considering the estimated 85,000 dogs in San Francisco, has anyone factored the additional citywide expense in cleaning up poo that people will refuse to pick up in a 17-cent bag three times a day?" asks Melinda Graves.

"For about eight years, I have reused bags many times because I want to do my part for our environment. In fact, for one month, I kept count of how many times I reused a single bag. Seventeen times in one month meant that 17 bags were not sent to the dump!" writes Charlotte Pederson.

I feel a book coming on: "101 Uses for Old Bags."

-- Fuzzy math? My column explained that the San Francisco Department of the Environment came up with the 17 cents by dividing the environmental cost of used grocery bags (\$8.5 million annually) by the estimated number of plastic and paper bags distributed in San Francisco supermarkets each year (50 million).

The \$8.5 million is the departments' estimate of what it costs the city to sweep up and dispose of bags, plus what it costs Norcal Waste Systems to remove plastic bags from its recycling and composting system.

People already pay

Some readers point out that city residents already pay for these costs through taxes and garbage-collection fees.

"Shouldn't the amount that is presently being paid for garbage service be taken into consideration when determining how much it really costs the city? Or are residents supposed to pay twice for the same service?" asks David Schnapf.

Engineer Neil Lillemark says the city's calculation ignores two facts: Some of the 50 million bags distributed each year get reused and don't go immediately into the waste stream, and a fee would cut bag consumption (and thus the city's costs).

Using certain assumptions, he suggests that "10 cents a bag would be a more fair estimate of the charge which should be applied if they were to go this route."

Some readers suggested it would be more economically efficient to ban free bags, but to allow grocers to sell them for those who forget or choose not to use their own. That would eliminate the cost of creating a system to collect, track and distribute the fees.

Mark Westlund, spokesman for the environment department, said the 17-cent fee is not set in stone, and if a bag fee went into effect, a reduction in taxes and/or garbage fees "certainly could be on the table." He adds that the department "would be open to any ideas that would address the issue."

-- Bad bagger behavior: Several readers said grocers could reduce waste if they simply instructed their baggers to use fewer sacks.

"Baggers can be careless, often double bagging for no reason, or putting one or two items in a bag that could have fit into another bag. It's probably faster to use a lot of bags instead of trying to figure out how to make the best use of each bag, but it's so wasteful," says Sarah Stockton of Daly City.

Paul Smith, a vice president of the California Grocers Association, explains: "We try to minimize breakage to product." If a bag breaks when a customer is moving it from store to car or car to kitchen, most stores that are members of his association will replace the contents for free.

"There are marketing reasons why we do this," he says. However, "There are retailers who are right now evaluating their clerk and bagger training to (encourage) reduction of bags."

-- Good question: Ford Kanzler of El Granada writes: "I've often wondered why food markets don't sell reusable cloth bags at the check stand (along with) all the impulse-purchase junk."

Concerns about health

-- Who knows where that bag has been? Mike McHugh fears reusing bags may be unhealthful.

"A new bag is clean! Customers can return home with their items confident that their purchases have been protected from dirt and germs. An old reused bag cannot guarantee such a situation. It may be dirty, even if you can't see the dirt with your eyes. It might have held raw meat that may have bled ever so little onto the sides of the bag. The bag might even have previously been used to carry poisonous substances!" he writes.

Point of interest: When Ireland imposed a 15-cent charge on all plastic shopping bags in 2002, it exempted a number of bags, including those that hold raw meat.

-- Why just supermarkets? Some readers wonder why the proposal applies only to grocers.

"Saving the environment can be done in many ways," writes Catherine Ying. "Instead of making our life more complicated by charging for shopping bags, why don't we start with something that is more of a luxury, such as Diaper Genie," which wraps dirty disposable diapers in plastic bags.

"What about stores like Walgreens that try to put every little item in a bag -- even if the customer is a woman with a large handbag," writes Beth Wells of San Francisco. And how about restaurants that put food "in those toxic Styrofoam boxes and then put the box in a bag."

"What bugs me is that my Chronicle is delivered every day in a plastic bag. They are limited in their re-use -- I don't have a dog and don't travel that often, as they make excellent wrappers for shoes or slippers," writes Doug Stewart.

Chris Blaser, The Chronicle's circulation vice president responds: "Our policy is to only deliver newspapers in plastic bags on rainy/heavy fog days. Our other general rule is to bag when the forecast is mixed.

"We do, however, have some carriers who bag more frequently (of their own initiative) in an effort to assure that the paper is in good condition. We do notify any of these carriers to stop bagging (except on rainy days) whenever we receive a call from a customer. We also make sure the plastic bags we buy come primarily from recycled materials."

Westlund says the city might consider extending bag fees "to other areas like fast foods, drug stores, etc. Right now (it's) strictly supermarkets."

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