

# STAFF REPORT

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council

**FROM:** Terri Thomas, Thurston County Solid Waste Reduction Supervisor

**DATE:** January 22, 2013

**SUBJECT:** Single-use Plastic Carryout Bags

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**OBJECTIVE:**

Present Plastic Bag report and receive recommendation on how to reduce our use of plastic shopping bags.

**PRESENT SITUATION:**

Plastic bags are the most common consumer product in the US, with the average resident using 350-500 bags per year. Less than 5% are being recycled. Solid Waste staff presented to the seven city councils earlier this year to provide information on the issue and to request a cooperative effort to work with their communities. The goal was to educate residents about the problems all these bags can create and identify possible solutions.

We are now providing the project report, which was approved by the Thurston County Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC). The SWAC consists of an elected official from each city, a County Commissioner, three citizen representatives as well as a recycling industry and waste industry representative. The group advises on solid waste and waste reduction issues for Thurston County.

The Plastic Bag report is posted at [www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/plastics](http://www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/plastics) and identifies the concerns related to plastic bag use, the work that was done with the community, and the results of 3,700 surveys. The proposed solutions, in the report, were suggested by our residents or are methods that have been tried elsewhere. The pros and cons of each are included. The draft report from Solid Waste staff did not provide any recommendations. The SWAC decided, unanimously, to make a recommendation for a ban on plastic bags.

The survey responses are listed, by jurisdiction, at the above website. Countywide, 49% would support a ban, 26% would not, and 25% said, "Maybe, I need more information". In the survey responses and community outreach, some people felt we just needed more education, more recycling locations in the community, and more bag giveaways. These would all require an increase in staff time, services, and supplies. Waste reduction efforts are funded by solid waste tip fees. When tip fees go up, trash service costs go up. This community outreach project alone

has cost the department over \$62,000 so far this year in publications, bags, and staff time. Education and community recycle bins have not proven effective in other jurisdictions, which is why cities and entire countries have turned to bans.

Some residents advocated for adding bags to the curbside bin so recycling would be easier. The recycling industry does not want plastic film and bags in commingled recycling. It causes various problems from the curb all the way to the end markets. The County could ask haulers to create a separate route, like done with glass, though bags would tend to blow around. Routes are very expensive so this would result in a cost increase for curbside trash service, as was the case of the glass route.

There is a benefit to taking plastic shopping bags out of the system because of the post-use issues. However, we are certainly not advocating paper over plastic. The end goal is to reduce the overall use of disposable bags. Linking the cost of the paper bag to the use of the paper bag is effective. If a customer brings his or her own bag, there is no cost. If a customer needs a bag, it is available from the store for a small fee. Based on the studies referenced in the report, this acts as the needed incentive to reduce use. Appendix A actually shows how model can financially benefit stores and the Northwest Grocers Association is in support of this method.

Based on the SWAC recommendation, staff has reviewed bans from throughout the US and the ones in Washington are some of the best. They are similar to each other and there are many exemptions such as produce, meat, and take-out bags. Food Bank type operations are not prohibited from using plastic bags. Store customers that use food assistance programs are exempt from paying the store's paper bag fee.

The free bags at the store have a cost. As customers, we pay for the bags, even if we do not use them. Ratepayers and taxpayers fund waste management, litter, and education. In addition, there are environmental costs as well. When looking for solutions to reduce our use, we have to ensure they will be effective and cost effective to implement.

**PROPOSAL:**

The SWAC has recommended that the city councils of the cities of Thurston County and the Thurston County Commissioners adopt a plastic bag ban. We are seeking the recommendations of each jurisdiction, which we will then present to the Thurston County Board of Commissioners. If it were determined to move forward with a ban, Thurston County Solid Waste staff would coordinate the implementation and outreach efforts. The first step would be to form a stakeholders group to develop the ordinance language. All subsequent required steps for adoption of an ordinance would then be followed.

**ACTION:**

Receive City Council recommendation on how to reduce our use of plastic shopping bags.