



January 14, 2013

Olympia City Council
PO Box 1967
Olympia, WA 98507-1967

Dear Council Members:

SUBJECT: Single-Use Plastic Bags

On Thursday, January 3, 2012, Ron Jones from the City of Olympia's Public Works Waste ReSources Utility attended the Utility Advisory Committee (UAC) meeting to discuss approaches to reducing single-use plastic shopping bags, the kind that stores now use to pack purchases at the cash register, in our waste stream.

Following a review of the supporting research and the presentation from staff, the UAC unanimously voted to support staff's recommendation of a regional ban on single-use plastic bags and the establishment of a small fee on paper bags. The UAC strongly supports a consistently applied regional ban with adequate lead time for successful implementation by merchants and the public.

We support a regional ban on single-use plastic bags for the following reasons:

- It supports the City's goals of reducing the overall waste generated in Olympia and in managing Olympia's waste stream responsibly, as outlined in *Toward Zero Waste: Olympia's Waste ReSources Plan 2008-2013*.
- Recycling plastic bags has proved to have very limited effectiveness in other communities, typically resulting in only a 5 to 8 percent recycle rate.
- Plastic bags clog recycle sorting machinery and increase recycling costs.
- Many of these single-use bags end up as litter; interfering with the function of storm drains, contaminating our waterways, and presenting hazards to marine animals.
- Eliminating the use of plastic bags supports the values of moving away from a non-sustainable, single-use model to one promoting front-end waste reduction.
- A regionally coordinated ban provides for consistent communication across jurisdictions and will reduce public confusion. The UAC encourages the City Council to make this same recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners (BoCC), and request that the County convene a stakeholder committee to develop a model ordinance. This model ordinance could then be consistently adopted by the various jurisdictions in Thurston County.

The UAC also encourages the City and Thurston County to pay considerable attention to how to encourage residents to choose more environmentally friendly alternatives to single-use bags, rather than simply focusing on how to eliminate them. Using available research to educate citizens about the types of reusable bags that result in the smallest environmental footprint is one obvious step

toward improving the eventual actual outcome rather than simply shifting the problems, but there may be ways to shape the eventual regulations to help as well.

A couple of other points of potential relevance to the Council's consideration of this issue were raised by one or more of the committee members in our discussion:

- Various methodological problems, including the non-representative sample, the self-reported responses, and at least some ambiguity about what kind of bags were being discussed in the survey questions, raise questions about the reliability of the survey as a quick guide to the general public's opinions and behaviors around single-use bags.
- Other aspects of people's daily lives probably contribute far more to environmental problems than these bags do – especially energy used for transportation and housing. This project is something within the purview of the City's Waste ReSources Utility, and we certainly support their working on it. However, an integrated City-wide analysis of the costs and benefits of potential investments of political and economic capital might well lead us to conclude that there were other possible investments which would produce significantly greater benefits at less cost than taking on this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please let me or Barbara Day, UAC Vice Chair, know if you have any questions regarding our recommendations.

Sincerely,



THAD CURTZ
Chair
Utility Advisory Committee

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cc: UAC Members
Steven R. Hall, City Manager
Rich Hoey, P.E., Public Works Director
Dan Daniels, Director of Waste ReSources
Ron Jones, Public Works Waste ReSources