

Newsweek

Paper Or Plastic? It'll Cost You.

Sarah Kliff**NEWSWEEK**

From the magazine issue dated Sep 8, 2008

Economist Peter Nickerson, 56, is a proud resident of Seattle, arguably the capital of green America, so it almost goes without saying that he supports aggressive environmental policies. He'd like to see his city make public transit free to reduce vehicle emissions. He wants to ban pesticides in rivers where salmon swim. He's a devoted recycler who even composts his own trash. Surely, then, he must love Seattle's new bag tax? (Starting in 2009, it would require drug, grocery and convenience stores to charge 20 cents per disposable bag.) Actually, Nickerson thinks it's a terrible idea.

A tiny tax with big environmental potential would seem like a natural fit for Seattle. Other U.S. cities, such as San Francisco, have banned certain disposable bags; Seattle would be the first to tax them. "We know it won't solve global warming," says Mayor Greg Nickels, "but a small change in behavior can make a big difference." According to a city survey from late 2007, though, 63 percent of Seattleites oppose the tax. And last week, an advocacy group called the Coalition to Stop the Seattle Bag Tax submitted a petition with more than 20,000 signatures, enough for a popular vote on it next year. In Seattle, it turns out, there are many shades of green—and for some, the "green fee" isn't green enough. Either the city government is "ill informed," says Nickerson, who's been studying the plan for the Northwest Economic Policy Seminar, or it's just looking at a town full of eco-warriors and picking off some low-hanging political fruit.

In defense of the fee, Nickels points to Dublin, Ireland, where a similar tax reduced bag use by 90 percent. But a recent study found the majority of Seattleites already recycle bags or reuse them for sack lunches and cleaning up after pets. And what if, Nickerson asks, residents begin replacing disposable (or "type 2") plastic bags with more durable, fabric-like polypropylene (or "type 5") bags—which are not recyclable? Even if residents opt for canvas, Nickerson estimates, people must reuse each bag some 300 times to offset the resources that go into making it. (The city disputes his figures.)

Others, even those who consider themselves plenty green, grumble about a levy that—in a progressive town—seems to hit regular folks the hardest. For Tim Rafferty, 49, who's currently on disability and already reuses his plastic bags as trash-can liners, the tax is just more money he doesn't have coming out of his pocket. "I'd hate to have the [store] bagger ask, 'Do you want to double-bag that?' and then be thinking about whether I want to spend the extra 20 cents," he says.

Whether Seattle's green fee survives or not, experts say "harm charges"—requiring consumers and companies to pay for environmentally unfriendly behavior—are the future of policy. The Seattle tax is "the leading edge of a broader trend," says Daniel Esty, director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. Soon green living might be the law of the land, not just a lifestyle choice.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/156361>

© 2008