

## August Program: Primary Ballot Issue

### REFERENDUM 1 - DISPOSABLE SHOPPING BAGS

#### City of Seattle Referendum Number 1

On August 18, the citizens of Seattle will decide to support or reject a 20-cent plastic and paper bag fee. In 2008, the Seattle City Council passed Ordinance Number 122752, requiring grocery, drug and convenience stores to collect the fee for every disposable shopping bag provided to customers. Stores with annual gross sales of under \$1,000,000 could keep all the fees they collected, to cover their costs. Other stores could keep 25% of the fees they collected, and would send the remainder to the city to support garbage reduction and recycling programs. The stores would get a business-tax deduction for the fees they collected.

In 2009, a sufficient number of voters signed a petition to refer the ordinance to a public vote as Referendum No. 1.

The referendum asks: should the ordinance be  
Approved? (“yes” vote)  
Rejected? (“no” vote)

#### Background

The ordinance, which had been due to go into effect in January, 2009, was based on several studies completed by the Seattle Public Utilities to determine the facts and examine options (see website below). Subsequent to the enactment of the ordinance, the American Chemistry Council, a lobbying arm for the chemistry industry, contributed over \$200,000 to conduct a signature-gathering campaign to put the ordinance to a vote of the people. A signature gathering business successfully gathered more than 20,000 signatures, enabling Referendum 1 to be placed on the ballot for the August 18 primary election.

#### How it Works

The goal of ordinance is to reduce the number of disposable bags used by individuals by requiring a fee of 20 cents for each disposable shopping bag a consumer uses at grocery, drug and convenience stores. Merchants will retain five cents per bag for administrative costs. Businesses that gross less than \$1 million will keep the entire 20 cent fee.

City revenue generated from the fee will be used to keep solid waste rates down, and to support waste prevention programs, recycling programs and environmental education. The fee would not apply to bags used inside stores to contain bulk items; bags for prepared food such as deli or bakery goods; newspaper bags; or dry cleaner bags. The program will require two new city positions for administration. If approved, the program will begin in January, 2010. Enforcement will be through a fine of \$250; however, limited staff for policing will mean relying on self-regulation by businesses. The ordinance is expected to raise \$10 million dollars annually.

#### Facts

- Seattleites use 360 million throwaway paper and plastic shipping bags every year
- That equals 8,500 tons of greenhouse gases.
- Almost 240 million bags end up in the garbage—almost 4% of all residential garbage, by volume.
- Compared to plastic, paper bags have four times the environmental impact—from logging, manufacture, distribution and disposal.
- Plastic bags are made of materials that do not compost.

#### The Debate

The debate centers around whether a fee-based program will accomplish the stated goal of reducing the number of disposable bags people use, whether the net effects of the program will reduce the negative environmental impacts and whether people will participate by using fewer disposable bags.

Arguments for APPROVING the Disposable Bag Ordinance include:

- A bag fee would reduce the 360 million bags used annually in the city of Seattle by 70% and generate \$10 million annually for waste prevention, recycling programs and environmental education.
- Disposable plastic bags have significant negative energy, climate change, wastewater, litter and water quality impacts on Seattle’s environment.
- Plastic bags are made from fossil fuels and remain as persistent environmental pollutants after their

useful life has expired.

- While paper bags are highly recyclable, the fact that they are heavier and thus a more carbon consumptive product than plastic makes them a poor choice to replace plastic bags. Disposable paper bags contribute to deforestation, do not last as long as plastic and tend to be reused fewer times.

Sierra Club, [sierraclub.org/](http://sierraclub.org/)

Seattle Great City Initiative, [www.greatcity.org](http://www.greatcity.org)  
People for Puget Sound, [pugetsound.org/](http://pugetsound.org/)

Arguments for REJECTING the disposable bag ordinance include:

- We don't have a plastic bag litter problem in Seattle. 90% of Seattleites recycle.
- The fee will cause people to buy plastic bags that were formerly provided by the stores. People use the bags provided by the stores for garbage can liners, storage, camping and other practical uses. They will now have to buy these bags.
- The fee will not induce people to change their

behavior or reduce the number of disposable bags used by consumers.

- The fee will place an unfair burden on consumers, particularly the poor, in these difficult economic times.

American Chemistry Council's Bag Tax Fact Sheet. <http://www.americanchemistry.com>

Northwest Economic Policy Seminar, Seattle Bag Tax: <http://www.seattlebagtax.org/>

A repository of numerous articles, studies and information put together by economists.

### **Other Resources and Information**

Executive Summary, Alternatives to Disposable Shopping Bags and Food Service: Prepared for Seattle Public Utilities, January 2008

City of Seattle Green Fee Ordinance (Ordinance 122752)

Knute Burger's article "The Bag Tax Rebellion" <http://crosscut.com/2008/11/15/mossback/18638/>  
Ethics and Elections Commission Disclosure Reports on Referendum 1

### SUPPORTING THE ORDINANCE

Sierra Club  
WashPIRG  
Earth Ministries  
GreatCity.org  
People for Puget Sound  
Seattle City Councilmembers:  
Tim Burgess, Sally Clark, Jean Godden,  
Richard Conlin, Nick Licata  
Seattle Mayor Greg Nichols

Green Bag Campaign  
[www.greenbagcampaign.org](http://www.greenbagcampaign.org)

### OPPOSING THE ORDINANCE

American Chemistry Council  
Northwest Economic Policy Seminar  
7-Eleven, Inc.  
Seattle City Councilmember Jan Drago

Coalition to Stop the Seattle Bag Tax  
<http://www.stopheseattlebagtax.com/>