FCSG statement on disposable bag fee ordinance

Statement updated on August 23, 2014

The Fort Collins Sustainability Group supported the passage of a disposable bag fee ordinance to reduce the number of disposable bags – and the attendant impacts on natural resources and greenhouse gas emissions – used in our community. After much discussion, the Fort Collins City Council approved this ordinance on August 19th, with support from Bob Overbeck, Lisa Poppaw, Gino Campana, Ross Cunniff, and Gerry Horak.

The final version of the ordinance is a combination of the two options described below. It establishes a five cent fee on each disposable bag provided at the checkout register by all retail establishments in Fort Collins. It does not include a sunset clause. The ordinance will take effect on April 1st, 2015. To view the ordinance, visit http://citydocs.fcgov.com/?dt=ORDINANCE&dn=City+Clerk&vid=3&cmd=showdt and download Ordinance 099-2014.

Background

At the May 13, 2014 Work Session, City Council directed staff to prepare an ordinance to reduce the number of disposable bags distributed by grocery stores at checkout registers. On July 1, Ordinance No. 099-2014 was adopted by a vote of 5-2 (nays: Weitkunat, Troxell) on First Reading.

Council directed staff to postpone Second Reading of Ordinance No. 099-2014 to August 19, to allow more time for Councilmembers to review public input on disposable bags. An informational meeting held July 30 (attended by 50-60 people) allowed the public to receive answers from staff and Councilmembers on specific questions regarding the proposed ordinance.

The “Option 2” ordinance was also developed for Council’s consideration. Option 2 was written at the request of multiple Councilmembers to take a new approach to an ordinance that could help reduce the use of disposable bags in Fort Collins.

The difference between the two options:

The first ordinance only would have applied to grocery stores and would have required stores charge at least 10 cents per bag and spend half of that money on providing reusable bags to low income community members in some form (such as donating them to the food bank, etc.). Food stamp recipients would have been exempt from the charge. Staff recommended that the ordinance sunset after 5 years, so that its effectiveness could be examined.

Option 2 would have applied to all retail establishments, including newspapers. Food stamp recipients would have been exempt. It did not include plastic bags inside the store for meat and veggies and also did not include farmers markets, fruit/veggie stands or restaurants. It would have sunset after one year for review. It did not require a 10 cent fee, but rather the actual cost of the bag that retailers must charge.

Fort Collins Sustainability Group position:

The Fort Collins Sustainability Group supported Option 1 because it contained a clear and consistent price for each bag, and it required stores to provide durable bags. We also supported staff’s recommendations to review the effectiveness of the ordinance after 5 years. We also recommended that it be extended to all stores.

In the event that Council did not pass Option 1, The Fort Collins Sustainability Group would have supported Option 2, but we asked that the price per bag be set to at least 5 cents to provide

consistency. We also strongly suggested that the one year sunset clause be extended to 5 years, to allow for more data to be gathered regarding the effectiveness of the bag fee.

Key points in support of a disposable bag fee

1. Over 100 countries, cities, and counties regulate single-use disposable bags – a.k.a. "plastic bags" – by either banning them entirely, or requiring stores to charge for bags, to give shoppers a financial incentive to bag their purchases in a reusable bag made of durable material.

A. A national list of places that have some sort of disposable bag ban is available here: www.cawrecycles.org/issues/plastic_campaign/plastic_bags/national.

B. An international list is available here: www.plasticbags.planetark.org/gov/othercountries.cfm.

2. Research indicates that each consumer uses as many as 342 plastic shopping bags per year.

3. People use 93% fewer resources and produce 67% fewer greenhouse gas emissions when they use durable shopping bags instead of choosing disposable bags.

A. Plastic bags are made from non-renewable natural gas and petroleum.

B. Plastic bags are a litter and visual pollution problem; once loose in the environment, they will not biodegrade, posing a threat to wildlife and ecosystems.

C. Paper bags require even more water to produce than polyethylene plastic bags. Paper bags also consume more energy during transport (they're heavier), create more solid waste and emit more greenhouse gas emissions than plastic bags.

D. Using paper means cutting down more trees, contributing to deforestation and loss of habitat.

4. Disposable Bags and CO2 Emissions:

A. For plastic bags, most CO2 (a greenhouse gas) emissions come from upstream emissions tied to energy and non-energy related emissions from the extraction and transportation of raw materials, as well as the high-temperature manufacturing process.

B. Plastic bags are made of plastic resins made from derivatives of petroleum and natural gas.

C. Emissions from the manufacturing process occur when energy is used to "crack" the raw materials – hydrocarbon molecules – into smaller hydrocarbons such as ethylene and propylene, as well as during

processing, when plastic polymers are created with different characteristics for different types of plastic bags.

D. Emissions also occur when plastic bag products are transported to market destinations.

E. Upstream emissions will differ depending on whether virgin stock or recycled material is used to produce the plastic bags.

F. For paper bags GHG emissions occur from both upstream and downstream emissions.

G. Upstream emissions are tied to harvesting trees (wood), manufacturing processes to make paper, and transportation of the product to markets.

H. Upstream emissions are also calculated from the loss of carbon sequestration when trees are cut down.

I. Downstream, paper bags contribute to increased methane (CH_4) emissions from decay of organic materials when they are buried in landfills.