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Is It Time to Bag the Plastic?

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL

IN my New York City apartment, the kitchen drawers, the coat closet, even the wine rack are overflowing with a type of waste that is rapidly disappearing elsewhere — the used plastic shopping bag.

Many countries and a handful of American cities have more or less done away with this supposed convenience item, by discouraging its use through plastic-bag taxes at checkout counters or outright bans. Walk down the streets of Dublin or Seattle or San Francisco and there is barely a bag in sight. Life continues.

“It didn’t take people very long to accommodate at all,” said Dick Lilly, manager for waste prevention in Seattle, where a plastic-bag ban took effect last summer. “Basically overnight those grocery and drugstore bags were gone.”

But in much of America we seem more addicted than ever. On a recent shopping trip to Target in Chicago for some dorm supplies while visiting my son, I emerged with what seemed to be more bags than socks or rolls of toilet paper (only a slight exaggeration). At my local supermarket, plastic bags are applied layer upon layer around purchases, like Russian nesting dolls.

“Plastic shopping bags are an enormous problem for New York City,” said Ron Gonen, the deputy commissioner of sanitation for recycling and waste reduction, noting that the city pays $10 million annually to send 100,000 tons of plastic bags that are tossed in the general trash to landfills in South Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania. That, he points out, “is amazing to think of, because a plastic bag doesn’t weigh much at all.”

All across the country, plastic bags are the bane of recycling programs. When carelessly placed into recycling bins for general plastic — which they often are — the bags jam and damage expensive sorting machines, which cost huge amounts to repair.

“We have to get people to start carrying reusable bags,” Mr. Gonen said. “We’re going to do what we can to start moving the needle.”

“The question,” he continued, “is do we use a carrot or a stick to change behavior?”

So far New York has used carrots, to little effect. (More about that later.) Unfortunately, most experts believe it will take a stiff stick to break a habit as ingrained as this one is in the United States. (In many European countries, like France and Italy, the plastic bag thing never fully caught on.)

In my case, I know I should bring a cloth bag along for shopping trips. And I do — when I remember. But experience shows that even environmentally conscious people need prodding and incentives to change their behavior permanently.

Where they exist, bans and charges or taxes (when set high enough) have been extremely successful and often raise revenue for other environmental projects. Unfortunately, these tactics are deeply unpopular in most of the nation.

After Austin, Tex., passed a bag ban earlier this year and with Dallas considering one, State Representative Drew Springer, a Republican, introduced the Shopping Bag Freedom Act in the Legislature. That act essentially bans bag bans, protecting the right of merchants to provide bags of any material to customers.

Businesses often fight hard against plastic-bag laws. When in 2007, Seattle first tried to impose a fee of 20 cents for each plastic bag, the American Chemistry Council financed a popular referendum that voted down the “bag tax,” before it even took effect, Mr. Lilly said.

It took several more years for the city to regroup and impose its current ban. Plastic shopping bags are forbidden in stores, and though paper bags may be used, each one costs the shopper 5 cents. (There are exemptions, however: restaurants managed to secure one for takeout food, for example.)

A number of states are considering some form of statewide bans or taxes. And last month, Representative James P. Moran, Democrat of Virginia, introduced a bill to create a national 5-cent tax on all disposable plastic or paper bags provided by stores to customers. Some of the revenue would be used to create a Disposable Carryout Bag Trust Fund and to maintain national parks.

Actually, the idea of a bag tax may not seem so foreign to federal lawmakers: for the past three years, Washington has had its own 5-cent tax. Although bag use there dropped sharply, many experts feel that the charge should be even higher. In Ireland, for example, the bag tax is about 30 cents per bag.

By any measure, New Yorkers are laggards on the issue. In 2008, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg tried unsuccessfully to pass a bag tax of 6 cents. More recently, New York State

has preferred to attack the problem with soft diplomacy. Since 2009, large stores throughout the state providing plastic bags have been required to take them back for recycling. But there is not much enforcement, Mr. Gonen said, and the program "hasn't put a dent" in the numbers.

While the chain pharmacies and supermarkets in my neighborhood initially put out recycling bins for the bags, they have largely disappeared. Some stores will begrudgingly take back plastic at the sales counter — though I've seen the bags subsequently tossed in the trash. (Though plastic bags can be recycled, they must be separated from other forms of plastic.) The Bloomberg administration is also considering partnering with supermarkets to create incentive programs with shopping points awarded to those who bring reusable bags.

Frank Convery, an economist at University College, Dublin, who has studied the effects of Ireland's 10-year-old bag tax — the first in the world — is skeptical: "As regards the plastic bag issue, whatever is done has to be mandatory," he said. "The New York model is designed to fail."

Mr. Gonen said cities got a lot of complaints about plastic bags. So why wouldn't that inspire more of them to take action? It is another paradox of environmental politics — just as when New Yorkers show strong support for a bike-sharing plan but protest when bike-sharing racks appear on their sidewalk.

In a city where dog owners are forced to pick up their pets' waste and are precluded from smoking in parks, why is it so hard to get people to employ reusable bags for shopping?

Elisabeth Rosenthal is a reporter on the environment and health for The New York Times.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 20, 2013

An earlier version of this essay misstated the name of a trade association that has opposed efforts to tax plastic bags. It is the American Chemistry Council, not the American Chemical Council.