

Testimony

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before

The New York City Council

Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management

Carryout Bag Reduction – Int. No. 209

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Environmental Advocates' mission is to protect our air, land, water and wildlife and the health of all New Yorkers. Based in Albany, we monitor state government, evaluate proposed laws, and champion policies and practices that will ensure the responsible stewardship of our shared environment. We work to support and strengthen the efforts of New York's environmental community and to make our state a national leader.

Environmental Advocates supports Intro. 209 and applaud the leadership of Council Member Brad Lander and all the other members of the City Council who are co-sponsors. Intro. 209 is a common-sense measure that will reduce the use of carryout bags, both paper and plastic. Solid waste pollution is an important problem for New York City to be a leader in addressing. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), between 500 billion and a trillion plastic bags are consumed worldwide each year. Americans alone throw away over 100 billion bags a year. That amounts to about 550 tons of plastic shopping bags, roughly 90 percent of which go directly to landfills. These bags are used for an average of 12 minutes, but they remain in our landfills, oceans, parks and beaches for thousands of years. Both

plastic and paper disposable bags are costly for retailers and consumers, environmentally damaging, and completely unnecessary.

False Attacks

Opponents of this effort are using misinformation to keep consumers stuck in the past. To be clear: there is no such thing as a free bag. Consumers are currently paying through higher costs of goods to provide wasteful and flimsy bags to everyone – even if, as is currently true, the customer brings reusable bags with them.

Offering plastic bags is not an altruistic venture for businesses. Retailers in the United States spend approximately 4 billion dollars each year to purchase disposable bags. This tremendous cost is being passed on to one group: the consumer. Many stores, such as Aldi's, do not carry plastic bags which is a key reason their goods cost less. And while opponents attempt to label this effort regressive, when given the option of paying less across-the-board, that is what consumers will choose.

In addition to the current systems' direct cost on consumers, municipalities – via taxpayer funds – are also spending millions of dollars to dispose of plastic bags. New York City alone spends 10 million dollars annually, not counting the thousands of homeowners, businesses, etc. tasked with cleaning up other people's waste.

A fee on carryout bags is a proven way to reduce waste and keep goods affordable for consumers. Any cost, no matter how nominal, associated with this proposal is easily avoided

by simply bringing reusable bags or carryout bags from previous shopping trips. If absolutely necessary, carryout bags remain available at a small cost.

How Others Have Made It Work

Implementing a fee on carryout bags will reduce the dependency on these bags, as has been shown in other parts of the country with similar laws. Similar measures are in place in other cities such as Washington, DC and Los Angeles, and internationally as well in countries such as Germany and China. According to the D.C. Department of Environment, there has been an estimated 60 percent drop in bags going to households. Business owners and managers are reporting they are providing 50 percent fewer bags to customers.

Reducing the amount of solid waste is an important component of the New York City Solid Waste Management Plan, recently amended in 2006. According to a 2004-2005 Residential and Street Basket Waste Characterization Study released by the New York City Department of Sanitation, each resident discards 20.51 pounds of grocery and shopping bags per year. Plastic bags are often not recycled.

In 2008, New York State passed a law requiring large retail stores to collect plastic bags for recycling. But too often plastic bags are discarded improperly and contribute to the litter clogging sewers and storm drains and get entangled in trees creating both eyesores and expensive clean-up costs for the city. Additionally, plastic bags pose an even bigger environmental problem as they never fully break down, they only break down into smaller and smaller pieces. The Great Pacific garbage patch and the growing Atlantic garbage patch are collecting more plastic as time goes on. Paper bags

are no better. Paper bags also come with a high carbon footprint; higher than a plastic bags’.

Transporting raw materials, creating the product, and transferring them to retail stores takes a lot of energy. The solution is to reduce a need for a carryout bags altogether and to incentivize the use of reusable bags.

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this bill which would reduce plastic and paper bag pollution in New York City. Today’s hearing is necessary to examine this issue in greater detail. Disposable bag pollution is an important issue that needs to be addressed.