



September 5, 2013

Common Council Office
City-County Building
210 MLK Jr., Blvd Rm. 417
Madison WI 53703-3345

Dear Council Members:

This letter responds to the Madison Common Council's approval of a resolution instructing city staff to prepare a report on the feasibility of banning plastic shopping bags and likely drafting language to implement the ban.

While we recognize the concerns some have on the issue of plastic bag usage, there is little evidence to suggest that a ban on plastic bags is the most effective solution.

Plastic bags are preferred by consumers, and especially by grocery store customers and retailers for many reasons. While some suggest they are not environmentally friendly because they are produced from petroleum and the litter produced by them is highly visible, there are many sides to this story.

As the staff moves forward on the Council's charge, it is important to recognize that the benefits of paper versus plastic grocery bags may not be as significant as believed. Here are some points to consider while discussing a ban on plastic bags.

- Plastic bags require 40% less energy to produce than paper; generate 80% less solid waste; produces 70% fewer air emissions; release more than 90% fewer waterborne wastes; and requires nearly 90% less energy to recycle one pound of the product.
- Plastic bags also save energy in transportation. It takes seven trucks to deliver the same number of paper bags as one truck of plastic bags.
- Plastics take up approximately one seventh of the space in landfills that paper grocery bags do.
- Paper bags don't degrade much faster than plastic bags but even more so the paper composting loses significance considering that nothing decomposes significantly in modern landfills
- Plastic bags are low cost; plastic bags cost approximately \$.01 whereas paper is \$.06-.10. A ban on plastic grocery bags would thus push prices higher for consumers, particularly grocery prices, as store owners increase reliance on more expensive paper bags as an alternative.
- Plastic bags are reusable and recyclable. Plastic grocery bags are some of the most reused items around the house; more than 80% of consumers reportedly save and reuse plastic bags. Further, there's a demand for recycled plastic that didn't exist 15 years ago. Plastic bags can be recycled into plastic "lumber", planters for gardening, new plastic bags and other products.

As you can see via the points above, instigating an ordinance banning plastic bags would not necessarily be better for the environment. There are significant costs that would hurt consumers and grocery stores as the cost of paper bags is greater than plastic bags. Litter is something however that can be significantly affected by achieving a relatively insignificant shift in individual behavior, including a little more effort to dispose of litter properly and increase recycling.

While the overall recycling rate for plastic bags is still low, virtually every store in the grocery business in Wisconsin participates in plastic bag recycling programs at their own expense. The grocery industry voluntarily offers plastic carryout bag recycling in many communities; several larger retailers have already established their own plastic bag recycling program for Wisconsin consumers. Therefore, instead of a ban, a more viable solution could be to center efforts on recycling, reuse and education.

Further, changing the minds of millions of shoppers or retailers won't come overnight, but some stores are helping to nudge shoppers toward reusable bags. But caution is needed here as well because reusable bags, unless they are washed after each shopping trip could be incubators for various harmful bacteria contributing to a food safety issue for that household.

With respect to the costs of plastic versus paper bags, a number of communities experimenting with plastic bag bans have either mandated or allowed retailers to charge a minimum of 5¢ per paper bag requested by customers to help the retailer recoup their additional costs of carrying and providing paper bags to customers. It is simply unrealistic to expect a business with a razor thin margin to accept increased costs based on government mandates without some form of financial relief.

There is also the matter of fairness and equity as it relates to the vagueness of the proposed ban. Is the ban intended to address all plastic bags used by a wide variety of retailers or will city staff focus on plastic bags distributed by grocery stores? If the research and eventual ban does not include plastic bags distributed by convenience stores, farmers markets, restaurants, hardware stores, dry cleaners, shoe stores, sporting goods stores, fast food/carry out restaurants, clothing stores, accessory stores, cell phone storefronts, craft stores, book stores and other establishments, then the action of the Common Council will be to target grocery stores. That action alone is completely contrary to the calls for access to more grocery stores in the City.

Finally, while the proponents of the ban did not seek our input at the beginning of this initiative, we are ready and willing to discuss the impact of this legislation at any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brandon Scholz", written in a cursive style.

Brandon Scholz
WGA President

cc: Wisconsin Grocers Association Board of Directors