

# Hartford Courant

SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2009 THE HARTFORD COURANT

BAG TAX

## A Penance For Using Plastic

5-CENT FEE  
IMPRACTICAL

By FERGUS CULLEN

**Y**ou're sensitive to the environment. You reduce, reuse, and recycle. But to a group of radical environmentalists and state legislators, you are an ecological sinner if you carry your groceries home in a plastic bag.

As penance, they want you to pay a "plastax" of 5 cents on every bag you use. This new tax should be rejected.

"We can solve the plastic bag crisis," declared Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment at a recent press conference, placing the use of plastic bags on par with real crises such as high unemployment or natural disasters.

The extremists' solution, sponsored by state Rep. Kim Fawcett, D-Westport, and House Majority Leader Denise Merrill, D-Mansfield, among others, is a proposed 5-cent tax on nearly all the plastic bags used in grocery stores. If passed, Connecticut would become the first state in the nation to tax plastic bags.

Connecticut residents use an estimated 400 million such bags each year. At a nickel each, the proposed tax could cost Connecticut consumers as much as \$20 million a year, less if the tax results in lower usage, as expected, but more if the fee is raised to 20 or 25 cents as other jurisdictions have considered. The money would go to the state government to pay for — more government.

Meanwhile, voluntary efforts to reduce the use of plastic bags are working just fine. Some grocers offer rewards and cash discounts to those who bring their own bags. The number of consumers who choose to purchase reusable bags is rising. Many stores collect used bags for recycling; popular Trex decking is an example of a product made from recycled bags. Such voluntary practices should be given more time before government mandates are considered.

If the tax is adopted, imagine this scene. You are standing in the checkout line at Stop & Shop watching a high school student sack your groceries. You're getting a little irritated because he's using more bags than necessary to get the job done. Doesn't he know that's costing you money? And did he really need to double bag that gallon of milk? The bagging complete, you just want to pay and get on your way. But the cashier needs to know how many bags were used so she can charge you the right amount of tax before she rings you up. Was it 14 bags or was it only 12? With all this excitement, you've lost track yourself. Let's

5-CENT BAG TAX, C4

✉ Fergus Cullen is executive director of the Yankee Institute in Hartford, a think tank that advocates free-market solutions to public policy issues. He can be reached at [fergus@yankeeinstitute.org](mailto:fergus@yankeeinstitute.org).

## 5-Cent Bag Tax

CONTINUED FROM C1

unload the cart and count again.

It's easy to see how the expense of implementing and enforcing the tax could exceed whatever revenue it might raise, and that's not counting the cost of aggravation and longer lines at the checkout. A nickel tax is nearly double the cost of the bag. At least the environmental extremists aren't proposing a rental tax on your shopping cart. Yet.

Other aspects of the Fawcett-Merrill bag tax bill are questionable. Taxing plastic bags but not paper ones will lead consumers to substitute one for the other with no benefit for the environment. The bill exempts the bags your newspaper comes in when it rains; it would be cynical to suggest this exemption was included to head off bad press coverage.

Bag taxes are also regressive, falling disproportionately on the poor and the elderly. Soon we may be hearing about senior citizens who have to choose between buying reusable bags

The tax could exceed whatever revenue it might raise.

and their prescription medicine.

The anti-plastic zealots seem to be motivated by more than just a desire to do right by the environment. There's a smug superiority at play here, a belief that people who bring their own bags to the grocery store, like those who drive a Prius when their neighbors have an SUV, are somehow better than those who don't. This was the subtext of enlightened Westport's decision to ban plastic bags from their town as of March. To these people, it's not good enough that you collect and recycle your bags, or reuse some as household trash can liners or to clean up after your dog. You're still a dirty polluter.

Hey, everyone's in favor of a clean environment. Let's bag the plastax, and let businesses and individuals continue to work together on a voluntary basis to reduce and recycle.