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Single-Use, Check-out Bag Ban - Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are the key reasons that Fort Worth should ban single-use check-out bags, both paper and plastic?

Fort Worth residents use more than 260 million check-out bags a year. Both plastic and paper single-use checkout bags have significant environmental impacts. Plus, we can eliminate the costs of single-use bags that are built into the cost of our groceries and the money that the city pays for the pollution costs, borne by city taxpayers. Other cities that have passed plastic-only bag bans have seen a massive switch to single-use paper bags—not a switch to reusable bags, which is by far the best option for the environment. West Texas towns such as Fort Stockton and Kermit have also cited danger to cattle, since livestock animals that eat littered single-use bags can become ill or die.

“Plastic ingestion is one real killer of cattle today with almost no known cure..... It is just a quiet and painful way for cattle to die with several difficult symptoms to confuse the issue.”

- International Texas Longhorn Association

2. What are the environmental problems with single-use plastic and paper bags?

Nationwide recycling rates of either type of single-use bag are extremely low: 60-90% of paper bags and 95% of plastic bags are NOT recycled. While metal, glass, and paper litter has decreased by over 80% in the U.S. since 1969, plastic litter increased by a staggering 165%, making this type of pollution the third most abundant. Plastic pollution in the ocean and other waterways has been documented since the early 1970's and now there are garbage patches in our ocean. In the Pacific Ocean, it's 1,000 miles wide. Although paper bags can be recycled by residents with access to recycling, paper bags use more energy and water to manufacture than plastic bags and result in more acid rain and greenhouse gas pollution.

3. What are the financial costs of these bags?

Of the 8 cities in Texas that have already passed single-use bag ordinance, only Austin attempted to quantify the cost to taxpayers created by bag pollution. At City Council's request, city staff did a study on the costs of plastic checkout bags; it found that they cost Austin taxpayers an estimated \$303,000 to 850,000 annually—and twice that amount for businesses due to litter cleanup costs, sewage and water systems maintenance and recycling machinery shut downs. Based on a pilot project, the city determined a separate citywide curbside bag plastic bag recycling would require an initial investment of \$4.5 million and an annual cost of \$1.8 million to maintain the program. There are other costs to us as state and federal taxpayers, and unquantifiable costs to the environment. **Currently, we all pay for the cost of the check-out bags in the price of our groceries whether we use them or not.**

4. Why not have retailers convert to biodegradable plastic bags?

Biodegradable bags also have greater environmental impacts than conventional plastic bags in greenhouse gas emissions and water use. They sometimes only degrade over a long timeframe or under ideal compost conditions, so they can result in the same litter and marine pollution problems as conventional plastic bags. In addition, biodegradable bags contaminate existing plastic recycling programs. Biodegradable bags are well-suited for some uses (such as compostable yard and food waste), but the costs they create would still be passed on to consumers. For retail check-out uses, reusable bags are the least expensive and least harmful to the environment.

5. Is it really possible for folks to go without plastic or paper check-out bags?

Cities across Texas, the U.S. and the world have shown that single-use bags are not a necessary and that the community is much cleaner without them. Brownsville, South Padre Island, Laguna Vista, Laredo, Fort Stockton, Kermit, Freer, Austin and Sunset Valley have all passed similar ordinances. Dozens of other cities in the U.S. have passed local laws against single-use bags and some countries such as Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and Rwanda have nationwide laws to address disposable bag pollution.

6. Can't voluntary plastic bag reduction programs take care of this problem?

Austin, San Antonio and Dallas have all tried voluntary bag recycling and reduction programs—and none have proven effective. Austin worked with retailers on a voluntary reduction plan, but the project failed to meet its stated bag reduction goal of 50% over 18 months. When the retailers later took the program to San Antonio, they only promised a 25% reduction—yet after a year, no reduction was found to have occurred!

7. Would a fee or tax on single-use bags have the same effect as a ban?

Washington, D.C. put a 5 cent fee on plastic check-out bags and their use declined by an estimated 80%. However, that still leaves 20% of the pollution problem untouched. Low fees that only address what we pay to the city for plastic bag costs fail to capture all the costs of this problem at the state and federal level, in addition to the environmental damage that can't be counted. It would be better to address this waste stream in a more comprehensive way. There is also a legal question as to whether such a fee is allowed under state law.

8. Milk, produce, meat and cold products need plastic bags to protect them from sweating. Will I still be able to get plastic bags for these items? What about dry cleaning or newspaper bags, or food carry-out?

There are exemptions for all of these bags. This effort is focused on single-use **check-out** bags at retailers.

9. Could retailers provide *any* check-out bags or boxes?

Yes. Stores could provide reusable bags of any material. There are industry standards for reusable plastic bags (4.0 mil in thickness) and paper bags (65# weight). Reusable bags must also have handles for easy carrying. Some stores already provide customers the boxes used to deliver products for free, which would continue to be allowed. The goal is to reduce single-use, disposable bags: Brownsville officials estimate that there are 375,000 fewer bags in the wastestream EVERY DAY since their single-use bag ban went into effect.

10. Where am I going to get trash bags for the kitchen and home waste baskets?

Trash bags can be purchased separately. The sale of trash bags would not be affected.

11. Would this ban affect pharmacy and convenience store usage?

The details of which retail stores are affected will be decided after a stakeholder process makes recommendations to the City Council. Various cities have exempted pharmacies, veterinarians, garment bags, and paper bags for restaurants, carry-out beverages and liquor stores.

12. What am I going to use to pick up dog poop?

Pet owners can still use any of the exempted bags for this, or purchase pet waste bags separately.

13. How will low-income families be able to get low cost or free reusable bags?

Retailers and others may provide free reusable bags as the ordinance is being implemented. In other cities with similar ordinances, low-cost 25 cent reusable bags are available at some stores. It's possible that consumers with extra bags will be able to donate bags for use by others. Hopefully, retailers will pass on

some of the money they save from not having to provide free disposable bags to consumers and lower the prices of their products for everyone.

14. How could the single-use bag ban encourage economic development?

A ban on single-use bags can create an opportunity for local economic development. There is at least one Austin-based business selling reusable bags, Blue Avocado. In addition, manufacturing reusable bags local could provide a low cost entrepreneurial opportunity for unemployed and under-employed people. Surplus and scrap textiles are 5% of our overall discard stream. Textiles have always been a difficult category of materials to recycling or reuse locally—those materials could become the raw fabrics for the local manufacturing of reusable bags. The City, Chambers of Commerce, and local business finance organizations could assist start-ups. Businesses affected by the bag ban could be encouraged to buy the locally produced bags for resale and to pay for advertising on them – two revenue streams for the new businesses.

15. I have read that reusable bags become “hothouses for bacteria.” How can this be avoided?

Simply washing your reusable bags occasionally will avoid this problem. However, even an industry-funded study commissioned by bag ban opponents found no harmful bacteria on the reusable bags they tested. Consumer Reports debunked this claim as well. There is simply no evidence that reusable bags harbor dangerous bacteria—but washing your bags is still a good idea, just like everything else you wash.

16. Do reusable bags have toxic chemicals?

There was one instance in which lead paint was used in some Chinese-made bags. There is no evidence that these bags posed an immediate threat to the public. The offending bags were identified and recalled.

17. Don't paper bags cost retailers more than plastic bags and give retailers an incentive to be less wasteful?

Yes, but consumers absorb those costs in the price of their groceries. Cost savings from a single-use bag ban within the retail and grocer industries could be put toward a public education partnership with the City of Fort Worth to implement the ban on both paper and plastic check out bags, provide low or no-cost reusable bags and reduce prices for consumers.

18. Don't plastic bags recycle just easily as plastic soda bottles? Why don't the trash companies or whoever picks up recyclable material want to deal with the bags in the same manner as the bottles?

Plastic bags are not recycled in the same plants that sort plastic bottles and other typical recyclables. Plastic bags can jam and even damage the automated machinery used to sort plastic bottles, glass, metal and paper. Another problem is that the economic value of used plastic bags is very small compared to other common recyclables and they must be clean and free of food waste in order to be recycled.

19. Why should the government intrude further in our private lives?

This type of ordinance is like other health and safety ordinances that are for the common good. We already have sanitation and anti-litter laws. **This ordinance will also help us reduce the cost of government services and help hold down consumer prices.** Learning to bring in your reusable bags when shopping is an easy habit to learn, just like buckling your seat belts.

20. What will be the penalty for non-compliance?

This will be determined when the final ordinance is written. The city will meet with stakeholders before writing this ordinance. Brownsville's ordinance has a \$500 fine on retailers for violating their ordinance.

21. How will this affect food pantries and other non-profit organizations?

The ordinance will probably only apply to retail stores, not food pantries or most non-profit organizations.