

The Problem with Plastic

By Ross Mirkarimi, MS '00



Ross Mirkarimi, MS '00, a San Francisco supervisor and co-founder of the California Green Party, wrote San Francisco's landmark law banning non-compostable plastic bags from supermarkets and large drug stores. San Francisco is the first city in North America to pass such a law.

Plastic checkout bags are a costly problem. Each year in the United States, it's estimated that 100 billion plastic bags are distributed by retail checkout counters. It takes approximately 35 million barrels of oil to produce them. Each year in San Francisco, 180 million bags (produced with approximately 650,000 gallons of oil) are distributed through large retailers. As a consequence, we spend more than \$8 million sweeping bags from our streets, untangling them from recycling sorting machinery, scooping them out of our storm drains so our sewers don't back up, and, ultimately, dumping them into the landfill.

Education and recycling programs have failed. We've had drop-off programs for checkout bags at area supermarkets for over a decade, yet we collect less than 1 percent of bags distributed.

By covering the cost of recycling and disposal for all manner of products, local governments are subsidizing the production of waste because producers know that whatever they manufacture and distribute, local government—which means taxpayers—will foot the bill.

That's simply unacceptable.

The ideal solution would be to charge a per-bag fee to cover the real costs of managing the waste stream. Ireland instituted a 15 cent fee on plastic checkout bags, and bag use dropped there by nearly 90 percent. Bangladesh, Taiwan, and Paris, among others, have instituted similar laws that have demonstrated great success. But this approach was cut off for San Francisco by backroom antics at the state capitol. The grocery lobby—at the same time it was engaged in an ultimately failed agreement with the city to reduce the use of plastic bags—added a rider to an otherwise innocuous recycling bill that prohibited California cities from charging fees to recuperate costs associated with plastic bags, or even to ask grocery stores how many bags they use.

We had to come up with another solution, so we looked to our existing recycling programs.

San Francisco has the nation's largest food scrap collection program. Every day we collect more than 300 tons of leftovers from homes and businesses and turn it into compost, which is used on area farms. Even so, the single largest component of our landfill is food scraps that could have been composted. The most common reason residents give for not collecting food scraps is that it's messy.

In an effort to encourage city residents to increase composting and at the same time decrease our use of traditional plastic bags, we decided to require supermarkets and large drugstores to use only recyclable paper bags that break down in the environment or compostable plastic bags primarily made from corn or potato starch. This eliminates the plastic that litters our streets and contaminates our recycling efforts, and at the same time gives residents a tidy solution to the "ick factor." They'll simply put leftovers into the compostable bag and slip it neatly into their green curbside compostables collection cart.

The law requiring the use of compostable plastic bags goes into effect Nov. 20 for large supermarkets and six months later for drug stores.

Other cities with food scrap collection programs would benefit by enacting similar legislation. In states where it's still legal, cities would do both their taxpayers and the environment a good turn by charging a fee on plastic bags. San Francisco may have been the first city to act on the problem, but we've heard from New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities big and small. It seems we're just on the front end of a nationwide trend.

As evidenced by the \$1 million in lobbying spent to derail our legislation, corporate interests who oppose us will do everything to stop this domino effect from occurring. [USP](#)