



Agenda No: 3.1

Mtg Date: June 12/08

Governance and Services Committee Report

TO: Governance and Services Committee

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DATE: June 04, 2008

SUBJECT: Plastic Bag Bans

There appears to be a world-wide legislative trend to ban or reduce the use of single-use plastic shopping bags. Countries like Rwanda, Bangladesh, Bhutan and parts of Australia and India have banned plastic bags and other countries such as Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, and Taiwan have imposed high levies on plastic bags. (The levies reduced single-use plastic bag use by as much as 90 percent and raised millions for other environmental initiatives.) China has banned free plastic bags (CBC, Jan., 2008) and the cities of Shanghai, Singapore, San Francisco and soon to follow, Paris, have banned single-use non-biodegradable bags in favour of reusable or decomposable bags. Many other jurisdictions (i.e., New York City, Australia, Great Britain, France, Italy) are drafting similar ordinances and expect to have bans or actions to discourage the use of plastic bags in place within the next several years.

In Canada there have been discussions about imposing a levy in Metro Vancouver and three small towns – Leaf Rapids, Manitoba, and Tofino and Rossland, BC - have passed regulations to ban plastic shopping bags or to encourage supermarkets to stop giving free bags away as a marketing tool. In May 2007, the Province of Ontario announced voluntary programs to encourage retailers and consumers to reduce plastic bag use. Its goal is to reduce plastic bag use by half by 2012.

The primary reasons for communities to ban single-use plastic shopping bags are litter control and improved waste diversion. A number of jurisdictions have also cited the waste of valuable resources and the poor results of voluntary initiatives to reduce plastic bag use as motivations to move forward.

As with any legislative change, there have been many arguments supporting and opposing the bans and/or levies. The following points outline those key arguments:

Argument Supporting Bans/Levies:

- Each year, five billions bags are abandoned in the environment (Worldwatch Institute, 2007).
 - Plastic bags account for over 10 percent of the debris washed up on the U.S. coastline (National Marine Debris Monitoring Program)

- Plastic bags photodegrade: over time they break down into smaller, more toxic petro-polymers which eventually contaminate soils and waterways (CNN com/technology, Nov. 2007)
- There are 46,000 pieces of plastic floating in every square mile of the world's oceans. Approximately 1 million sea birds and 100,000 marine animals die each year after ingesting discarded bags. (World Wildlife Fund report, 2005)
- Unless government regulates, research and experience shows that efforts to encourage people to use reusable bags hasn't worked.
- Even when recycling options are offered in a community, the recycling rate for plastic bags is very low. For example, despite San Francisco's excellent residential recycling program, the recycling rate for plastic bags is only 1 percent (Christian Science Monitor). It is estimated that 1-3% of bags are recycled in Canada. Locally, in 2007 we recycled almost 800 tonnes of plastic film.
- Most bags are made of polyethylene, a thermoplastic made from oil. China has determined that it will save 37 million barrels of oil due to their ban of free plastic bags (CNN, Jan., 2008)
- Local governments are subsidizing the production of waste because producers know that whatever they manufacture and distribute, taxpayers will shoulder the disposal responsibilities and costs.
- There appears to be strong public support for the banning of plastic bags. There was no public backlash in any of the countries and cities that banned or charged levies on plastic shopping bags and a recent Canadian survey shows support for the initiative. (Angus Reid, 2007.)

Arguments Opposing Bans/Levies:

- Ninety-three percent of British Columbians reuse their shopping bags two or more times (Decima Research, 2006). Plastic bags are reused as liners for household wastebaskets, storage, book and lunch bags, and to pick up after pets.
- If shopping bags are banned, residents are more apt to purchase "kitchen catchers" and may increase the overall plastic resin used in a community (Canadian Plastics Industry Association, 2006).
- In the Central Okanagan, residents can recycle plastic bags in the blue bag curbside recycling program or can take them to a recycling depot and most major supermarkets for recycling.
- The use of biodegradable bags without the option to compost the bags impedes plastic bag recycling programs because biodegradable bags cannot be recycled. Consumers don't differentiate the two bag types, causing problems for plastic recycling processes.
- The plastic-bag lobby is fighting hard to stop legislative bans and/or levies. The Canadian Plastics Industry Association has threatened to legally challenge Leaf Rapid's, or any community's, decision to ban plastic shopping bags. It contends that communities do not have the right to determine what a private enterprise can or cannot market from its premises. (Canadian Press, 2007)

Some Facts about Plastic Bags:

- The first plastic sandwich bags were introduced in 1957. Department stores started using plastic bags in the late 1970s and supermarket chains introduced the bags in the early 1980s.
- More than a trillion plastic bags are produced annually worldwide.
- Five billion bags are abandoned in the environment each year.
- Plastic bags take 400 to 1000 years to degrade (The Passionate Eye, CBC, 2007).
- On average, a family of four will consume 1000 plastic bags in a year (The Passionate Eye, CBC, 2007). That means we in the Central Okanagan consume more than 42 million bags per year.
- When 1 ton of plastic bags is reused or recycled, the energy equivalent of 11 barrels of oil are saved, according to the EPA.
- Today's plastic bags use 75 percent less resin than 20 years ago and 63 percent less energy in their manufacture, while maintaining the same strength and durability.

Angus Reid Poll: Canadians support banning plastic shopping bags

Three-in-five (62%) Canadians would back a law banning plastic shopping bags in stores

04.11.07 Wednesday

[TORONTO - Apr. 11, 2007] – The majority of Canadians would support a law banning the use of plastic shopping bags in stores, a new Angus Reid Strategies poll has found.

After the Manitoba town of Leaf Rapids recently passed a by-law prohibiting the use of plastic shopping bags in stores in order to reduce waste and litter, our online survey of a representative national sample found that most Canadians (62%) would support similar legislation in their own town or city.

The largest level of support for this idea is actually in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where seven in ten respondents say they would back the proposal. Ontario (65%) and Quebec (64%) are close behind.

Alberta holds the lowest level of support for this measure—although still above the 50 per cent mark at 54%—but also the highest number of undecided respondents (21%) in this matter.

Atlantic Canada and British Columbia have the largest concentration of opponents to the proposed ban, with 34% and 33% of respondents, respectively, saying they would reject legislation to curb the use of plastic bags.

In terms of political affiliation, NDP (72%) and Liberal (68%) voters are the most disposed to express support for the ban on plastic bags. Conservatives, on the other hand, are the least supportive, with 49% of respondents saying they would back the measure and 39% claiming they would reject it.