

A Plastic Bag Ban Framework for Atlanta

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District2Atlanta

The Heart of the City

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Plastic Bag Ban/Tax At a Glance

Overview

Americans use about 100 billion plastic bags a year¹. Only 1% of plastic bags are returned for recycling with most ending up in landfills. Plastic bags can take up to 1,000 years to decompose. Up to 80% of ocean plastic pollution ends up in the ocean. 5% of all marine debris collected in the past 25 years was plastic shopping bags.

In order to combat waste and reduce bag use, cities and countries are using bans and taxes to encourage the use of paper and reusable bags. As of last July, the United Nations counted 127 nations that have banned or taxed bags. Six U.S. states do (none in the Southeast), while cities like Washington, D.C. charge a small usage fee.

What's the difference?

Plastic Bag Ban

This policy usually bans thin, single-use bags made from polyethylene from being sold at retailers, typically supermarkets and restaurants. It does not prohibit all plastic bags from being sold. Some cities allow retailers to provide thicker, reusable plastic or paper bags instead for an additional fee, varying in the U.S. from 5-50 cents. Penalties for failing to enforce the ban include \$100-300 fines.

A downside to these laws is the unintended consequence of an increase in the use of plastic trash bags. The thicker plastic bags that often replace single-use bags and reusable tote bags are carbon intensive to produce. While better than single-use, they still take time to decompose in the ocean, putting wildlife in danger.

There are also drawbacks to a switch to paper. Paper bags actually use three times the energy needed to produce plastic. And composted paper generates 80% more solid waste than plastic. Paper, however does not impact ocean wildlife as plastic does.

Bag Tax

A plastic bag tax or fee can take on a few forms. They typically vary from 5-10 cents. But it can also be percentage-based. In Breckenridge, Colorado, the tax is 10% for retail plastic bags. Some states and cities also charge additional fees for using paper. Plastic bags used for sanitation such as raw meat or fish are at times not subject to the charge. There is also variance as to where proceeds go.

¹ All statistics from [Center for Biological Diversity](#)

A tax is designed to incent the use of reusable bags. Proponents argue that using a fee is a less dramatic shift than an outright ban.

What are the benefits?

Wildlife and environmental protection

Single use plastic bags often end up contaminating waterways and don't biodegrade. Animals mistake the bags for food and consume them, which can lead to the animal's death from choking or infection from toxins. Reducing the use of plastic bags decreases these deleterious effects.

Increases in tourism

Plastic pollution in waterways and streets threaten tourism in many cities and countries around the world. Pollution and litter are largely considered eyesores to residents and tourists alike. Without plastic bags floating on streets or getting caught in trees, visitors are free to enjoy the sights of Atlanta comfortably and help boost the tourism industry in the city.

Reduced cleanup costs

City governments often spend millions of dollars each year cleaning up parks and roads from litter. For instance, public agencies in California spend more than \$500 million annually in cleanup for things like plastic bag litter that ends up clogging storm drains². After San Jose's bag ban, the city saw that storm drain systems were 89% cleaner. If plastic bag use and litter are reduced, money used for cleanup can go toward other sources instead.

Cutting retailer costs

Purchasing plastic bags can cost retailers up to \$4 billion a year³. The cost they incur is often absorbed by items placed in the bags. But, a reduction in plastic bag use can reduce a store's spending from \$440,000 to \$2,500⁴ on bags within a year and lead to future savings for consumers.

What are the costs?

Increased use of thicker plastics

In a 2019 study⁵, one researcher found that an unintended consequence of banning plastic bags in California was the increase in the use of plastic trash bags, which contain more plastic on average. This is due to the fact that many people used carryout plastic bags as trash bags pre-regulation. These trash bags use thicker plastic, which is more carbon-intensive to produce.

² [Sierra Club](#)

³ [Wall Street Journal](#)

⁴ [SmartConnect](#)

⁵ [Journal of Environmental Management and Economics](#)

Costs of single-use plastic alternatives

Single-use plastic alternatives, such as paper and biodegradable plastic bags often cost more per unit than single-use plastic bags. A standard plastic bag costs about one cent to produce compared to 4 or 5 cents per paper bag. The additional costs of paper bags are often incurred by the consumer directly or indirectly.

Higher carbon intensity of paper

Paper bags take more carbon to recycle and require more energy to manufacture due to higher biomass. Due to higher weight, it takes more diesel to deliver the bags to stores. Paper subsequently produces more air and water pollutants than plastic bags during production.

Domestic Case Studies

Washington, D.C.

Date Founded: 2010

Learn More: [Skip the Bag, Save the River](#)

Notable Aspects: D.C. implements a 5-cent tax on single-use paper and plastic bags on any business that sells food or beverages. 80% of the fee goes towards the Department of Energy & Environment (DOEE) with the other 20% to the retailer. From 2010-2017, the tax generated about \$16 million in revenue. City officials say that since inception, usage has dropped 50-70%. Addressing affordability concerns, the DOEE has worked with grocery stores, Council offices, and community service organizations to distribute free, reusable bags.

Outer Banks, North Carolina

Date Founded: 2010

Notable Aspects: North Carolina implemented an eight-year plastic bag ban on the Outer Banks, to protect its beaches. Volunteers noticed fewer bags on the beaches, but there was no formal survey. The program was unpopular. Some business owners said it placed most of the burden on them. In 2017, the ban was repealed by the state legislature with support from the North Carolina Retail Merchants Association.

Beaufort County, South Carolina

Date Founded: 2018

Notable Aspects: Beaufort County has banned single-use plastic bags from all retailers. They use the same three-tiered fine structure as the Outer Banks. This came amid strong community support. Per the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce, a majority surveyed said they could live without single-use bags. Major chains such as Wal-Mart and Target faced backlash for providing new, thicker plastic bags after the ordinance passed. In 2019, the state legislature introduced a bill that would eliminate all existing bans on single-use bags (15 total). Proponents said the policies were harmful to businesses. Plastic bag manufacturers donated more than \$50,000 to candidates in 2015. The American Progressive Bag Alliance spent more than \$80,000 lobbying against the ban. Yet, these efforts have been for naught to date.

Fulton County, Georgia

Date Founded: 2019

Notable Aspects: The Fulton County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to ban single-use plastics in all County owned, operated, and leased facilities by January 1, 2020. The board directed the Fulton County Energy and Sustainability Manager and Chief Financial Officer to create and maintain the list of prohibited plastics, which will be provided to the Department of Purchasing and Contract Compliance to find non-plastic alternatives. The proposal was also forwarded to cities in Fulton County to encourage them to follow suit.

International Case Studies

Hong Kong

Date Founded: 2009

Learn More: [Plastic Bag Charging](#)

Notable Aspects: Hong Kong has levied a 50-cent fee (0.064 USD) on plastic shopping bags. The first phase of implementation included supermarkets, as well as convenience and cosmetics stores. The second phase, beginning in April 2015, included all retail. Revenue from the fee is returned to the government on a quarterly basis, which is used to fund environmental projects. In 2015, the government stated that the amount of plastic bags sent to landfills had reduced by up to 90%. One study, however, found that the amount of plastic in bags increased by more than 25% due to the use of heavier garbage bags and reusable non-woven plastic bags. Many vendors and consumers alike were confused about the policy during the second phase because of the many exceptions (IE chilled beer cans will not be taxed if placed in a bag, but will be if unrefrigerated). Law enforcement still has trouble with regulation and enforcement, especially among more informal market stalls and street vendors.

England

Date Implemented: 2015

Learn More: [Carrier bags: why there's a charge](#)

Notable Aspects: The UK mandated that all businesses with over 250 employees must charge 5 pence (7 cents) per each single-use plastic bag used. Paper bags are free of charge. Businesses must report how many bags are sold at the end of each year. In many shops, if consumers purchase a reusable bag, retailers offer a free replacement once it is worn out. Supermarkets are able to choose where the revenue goes, but most are expected to donate to charity. In the first year, England's plastic bag usage in supermarkets dropped by 85%. About £146.2 million has been donated to charities and local causes since 2015. Following initial success, the fee was raised to 10 pence in 2018, And now all retailers must charge the tax, not just large businesses. This will begin in January 2020.

Kenya

Date Implemented: 2017

Notable Aspects: Kenya has banned all single-use plastic bags. Only plastic used to wrap meat and fresh food served in hotels is allowed. The ban took three tries over ten years to pass due to unpopularity. This is because the ban has some of the harshest penalties in the world, including fines of approximately \$41,000 USD to the maximum punishment of 4 years in prison. The ban caused about 100,000 jobs in the plastic bag industry to be affected. Many street vendors complain about the cost of the bags they must provide and wish for a cheaper alternative to single-use plastic bags. Cartels and a black market for plastic bags have also risen as a result of the ban

A Plastic Bag Free Atlanta

Everyday cities and countries around the world are announcing taxes and bans to reduce the use of single-use plastic bags in their communities. Atlanta can join them by implementing the following changes:

1. Institute a ban in City of Atlanta government buildings. It is the best choice given that the City of Atlanta could not implement a per bag fee as it is technically a tax, and therefore illegal under Georgia law.
2. Replace single-use bags with recyclable paper bags, which are more durable and better for the environment. Although paper bags are more carbon intensive to produce, ultimately they do degrade in landfills and the ocean quicker than biodegradable plastic bags.
3. Employees should be required to ask customers if they need a bag with every purchase to reduce overall use as much as possible.
4. Since employees return to the same building every weekday, the city can distribute free reusable lunch and tote bags to ease the transition as part of an awareness campaign.
5. Chart a course that is sympathetic to the unique concerns of the airport, whose clientele and norms are different from other buildings. Ensure that a plastics bill is thoughtful and applies common sense to their legitimate implementation concerns.
6. Pass an accompanying resolution asking that the city's major private users of plastic bags, such as grocery stores and sports arenas, join in efforts to make this positive environmental change. The resolution should contain language asking that the City's Office of Resiliency proactively pursue partnerships to make this happen.