

City and County of Denver Disposable Bag Fee -- Frequently Asked Questions

What is the problem we are trying to solve?

Plastic waste! It is a major cause of litter in rivers, oceans, cities and natural areas. It is estimated that over 1 trillion single use plastic bags are consumed globally each year, or 1 million bags per minute. Shoppers in the U.S. use about 1 plastic bag per person per day, which is approximately 120 billion bags per year. Denver residents use an estimated 150 million – 250 million bags per year!

Only 1%-5% of plastic bags are recycled. So, most end up as litter or contaminating our waste streams. Plastic bags are a major cause of litter in our rivers and oceans and in the South Platte River and the Cherry Creek. They do not decompose, but rather break down into micro particles that are ingested by animals, contaminate our soils and have been found in rain and snow in Colorado.

In 1955 *Life* magazine celebrated “Throwaway Living” thanks in part to disposable plastic. However, as Annie Leonard, the Executive Director of Greenpeace USA said, *“There is no such thing as ‘away’. When we throw anything away it must go somewhere.”*



What is the goal of the ordinance?

To reduce the use of single use plastic and paper bags and associated litter and waste issues by encouraging consumers to bring their own reusable bags to shop.

Why a fee and not a ban?

State law prohibits Denver from banning single use plastic bags. (C.R.S. § 25-17-104). In cities where plastic bags were banned, stores offered free paper bags which did not change consumer behavior. Shoppers just switched from single use plastic to single use paper. The fee has been proven to change behavior.

Why does the fee apply to paper bags?

Even though paper bags are compostable and recyclable, the manufacturing and transportation of paper bags has a large carbon footprint. The manufacturing of paper bags also uses a tremendous amount of water. For these reasons and more, paper bags are not an environmentally positive alternative.

Why not encourage recycling single use plastic bags instead of charging a fee?

Most grocery stores have a bin for bags to be recycled. However, of the 1 trillion single use plastic bags that are produced each year, only 1%-5% are recycled. Most are either thrown away or improperly included in curbside recycling. Do you know that bags damage machinery at recycling facilities?

Has this type of ordinance been implemented anywhere else?

Yes! There are 11 other municipalities in Colorado that have some sort of single use bag ordinance, including Boulder, Breckenridge, Vail and Steamboat Springs. Additionally, there are over 400 ordinances across the United States,

including California and NY, and countries around the world that have single use bag legislation! Why are there so many? Because they work!

But I use those bags for trash can liners, to pick up pet waste, and many other things!

You can still choose to use single use plastic bags at the store and pay the \$.10 fee or purchase small trash can liners. For pet waste, think of reusing your newspaper bag or the plastic sandwich bag you used for your lunch. You can also purchase pet waste bags.

What types of bags does the fee apply to?

It only applies to single use plastic and paper shopping bags at retail stores including grocers, hardware, convenience, drug and department stores. These are the bags we get at check-out. The ordinance does not apply to: reusable bags, produce bags, bags for bulk food items, bags to prevent food contamination, newspaper bags, dry cleaning bags, etc.

What is a “reusable bag”?

A reusable bag has handles, is made of cloth, fiber or other material that can be washed, can carry at least 22 pounds and is capable of at least 125 uses. If made of plastic, it cannot be made of plastic film where thickness is measured in mils. Reusable bags must be labeled with the name of the manufacturer, the material and where it was manufactured.

When I order my groceries in advance for pick-up or delivery, the stores bag them in single use bags. Will I have to pay the fee for these bags?

Yes.

How does the bag fee work?

For every new single use plastic and paper bag you use at a retailer, you will be charged \$.10. The store will keep \$.04 of the fee and the city will receive \$.06 of the fee which will be used for education, enforcement, waste reduction efforts and free reusable bag giveaways. If you bring your own bags, you will not pay a fee.

What is the timeline for the bag fee?

The proposal will go to City Council’s Finance and Governance Committee on December 3rd. If it passes out of committee it will have two hearings before the full council and then to the mayor for his signature. There will be an education and marketing campaign that will include free reusable bag giveaways in the months before the fee goes into effect. It is anticipated that the fee will start on July 1, 2020.

What will the bag fee be used for?

The fee will be used for program education and marketing, free reusable bag giveaways, waste reduction efforts, as well as administrative and enforcement costs of the program.

****Since the Single Use Bag Fee is a fee, not a tax, all proceeds collected must be used only for the purposes described above. The fee cannot be used for general government expenses.***

What stores will collect the fee?

All retail stores including grocers, hardware, convenience, drug and department stores. It does not apply to restaurants.

I’m on a fixed income, am I exempt from the fee?

It depends. If you received SNAP funds, yes you are exempt. If you don’t, remember to bring your own bags and you won’t be charged the fee. As part of the education and marketing campaign, free reusable bags will be distributed.

Can I reuse single use plastic bags and paper bags I already have?

Of course! The fee is only charged when the store gives you a new single use plastic or paper bag.