

Boulder's 20-cent fee on disposable bags moves forward in initial 5-0 decision

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A proposed 20-cent fee on all disposable grocery bags -- paper or plastic -- took a step forward Tuesday night as five Boulder City Council members approved it for a second reading.

Four of the nine City Council members -- Mayor Matt Appelbaum and council members Suzy Ageton, George Karakehian and Ken Wilson -- were absent from Tuesday's meeting.

The remaining members -- Deputy Mayor Lisa Morzel and council members Suzanne Jones, Tim Plass, K.C. Becker and Macon Cowles -- all voted in favor of the bag fee, which would require a public hearing and a second vote before becoming law.

If adopted, the fee would not go into effect until July 2013.

The fee would apply to all paper and plastic bags at food retailers, including grocery stores, convenience stores and Target. Gas station stores would be exempt if food sales account for less than 2 percent of their business.

The fee would not apply to the bags used to collect produce or protect glass bottles from breaking.

Retailers would get to keep 4 cents of the fee to cover their costs in reprogramming computers and changing procedures to collect the fee.

City officials say the rest of the revenue would be used to pay for educating people about reusable bags and supplying reusable bags to low-income residents who would be disproportionately affected by the fee.

Students from Fairview High School's Net Zero Club -- whose activism on behalf of a plastic bag ban brought the issue to the forefront -- filled the City Council chambers and expressed disappointment in the proposed ordinance.

They asked that the council include language in the ordinance that would introduce a ban at a later date.

"A bag ban is exciting, and this ordinance is disappointing," said Dustin Michels, a Fairview High School student.

City officials had decided against a bag ban and in favor of a fee because they worried shoppers would just switch to paper bags, which have their own environmental problems.

Also, representatives of EcoCycle had advocated for a fee.

A majority of people who responded to an online survey opposed the bag fee as a new tax, but just one person spoke against the bag fee Tuesday night.

Steve Haymes said he uses canvas bags for shopping, but he also occasionally gets plastic bags -- and reuses them repeatedly.

"Here is a nice, reusable -- reused many times -- plastic shopping bag," Haymes said, holding up a plastic grocery bag. "I use it to put my dirty hiking boots in. I use it to line my trash can. I use it to clean my cat box."

Jones said the city should take a broader look at its trash policy and the types of bags and receptacles people use to collect their trash. She also said the city should reconsider a bag ban in the future.

City Council members also said the city should look for a way to produce reusable bags locally for distribution through the program.

Becker questioned how the city arrived at the 20-cent fee.

The city hired consultants from TischlerBise Inc. to determine what the fee should be. Those consultants looked at what plastic bags now cost, both directly and in indirect costs to the area's waste management companies, who sometimes have to stop equipment and pull out bags by hand. They also looked at what it would cost to administer a bag fee, including additional costs to grocery stores and costs to the city for education and distribution of free, reusable bags.

City officials say they think the "nexus study" that connects the fee to actual costs incurred by the city means the fee is not a tax and does not have to go on the ballot.

The only council member to oppose the fee in theory back in May was Karakehian, who was not present Tuesday.

The fee will come back before the City Council on Oct. 16.