

## Dallas lawmaker sponsoring bill to tax plastic bags in Texas

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AUSTIN – Rep. Rafael Anchia thinks he has the 7-cent solution to plastic bags.

The Dallas Democrat wants Texas to join two other states pondering the problems, pollution and politics of taxing each of the ubiquitous sacks that start at groceries, hardware stores and retail shops but often end up in sewer systems, landfills, parking lots, riverbeds, up against fences and blowing down highways.

"If people know that there's an added cost to doing plastic, they're either going to use paper, which is biodegradable, or they're going to bring their own bag," Anchia said.

Under his bill, a small part of the 7 cents charged on each plastic bag would go back to the retailer while the rest would help cities run their recycling programs.

Virginia and Maryland also are debating similar fees for plastic bags and so are cities such as Seattle, Washington and New York. More than a dozen other cities have passed or are debating bans on the convenient little devils.

"I've already heard from the grocer lobby," Anchia said. "We're going to work with the industry to get something that makes sense, but that changes the conversation on plastic."

Like the bags in the environment, this proposal will not go away, he said.

Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, has a different handle on the bag problem, and Anchia has filed the same bill in the House, as a Plan B.

Her proposal would require stores that supply plastic bags to also offer recycling bins and reusable shopping bags. In addition, the plastic bags would have to be stamped with a reminder to bring them back to the store.

"The smart, savvy retailers are going to embrace this," Van de Putte said.

Indeed, Wal-Mart, H-E-B grocers and many other large outlets not only like her plan, they're already doing most of it.

"We are very hopeful this bill will pass," said Wal-Mart senior manager Sally Aeillo.

With its own recycling program, plus its sale of 50-cent reusable shopping bags, Wal-Mart has managed to operate its program at a profit, she said.

Plus, with many cities contemplating plastic bag programs, Wal-Mart would like the convenience of one-stop shopping: a uniform law that still allows plastic bags.

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**Rep. Rafael Anchia**, D-Dallas, thinks a 7-cent tax on plastic bags in Texas could be part of the solution to ending use of the ubiquitous and environmentally unfriendly sacks.

"There are a lot of uses for them," she said. "Our customers will put them in their trash containers as liners. They might walk their dogs with them. ... It's going to be a long time before we really educate consumers on the problems of litter and waste."

The city of Austin considered a ban on the plastic bags, as have El Paso and Arlington.

But instead of an outright ban, Austin began a voluntary program in 2008 similar to the one proposed by Van de Putte. Data collected by the five participants – H-E-B, Randall's, Wal-Mart, Walgreens and Target – showed that in the first six months, plastic bag recycling increased 20 percent, the stores sold 443,227 reusable bags, and demand for the disposable plastic bags dropped 40 percent.

"I would consider it to be a big success," said Austin City Council member Lee Leffingwell, who helped sponsor the proposal.

Arlington has explored a plastic bag ban since last spring, and it could go to the council in March or April.

Robert Smouse, Arlington's environmental services executive manager, said his proposal would first include a 12- to 18-month educational program to persuade consumers to switch to reusable bags. A ban would be recommended only if the city failed to meet goals to increase recycling and reduce bags in the landfill.

Smouse said he'll keep an eye on the legislation in Austin. "It would be nice for [legislation] to happen," he said. "It wouldn't just be this city and that city."

While lawmakers explore their options, at the place where the plastic meets the road – grocery parking lots – consumers were divided.

Don Eliot, a retired chemical engineer carrying plastic sacks from the Uptown Albertson's in Dallas, said he has no buyer's remorse and believes lawmakers are just looking for something else to tax.

But Al Imhuelsen, who also carried his groceries in three plastic bags, said he uses them out of convenience but feels guilty about it.

"They're stacking up everywhere," he said. "The less plastic, the better."

*Staff writers Marissa Alanis and Jeff Mosier in Dallas contributed to this report.*