

Plastic bag ban starts to roll across region

Published: September 27, 2013

The Olympian

It seems inevitable now that thin, single-use plastic grocery bags will become a relic of the past. Tumwater City Council and the Thurston County Commission both approved an ordinance this week that is being considered countywide to ban the bags. Other South Sound councils should follow suit.

The bag ban is spreading across Washington and developing into a nationwide trend. It's popular because most of the 30 billion bags used annually in America end up washing down rivers or streams into the ocean. They are the second-most common trash items found on ocean beaches.

Only about 5 percent of the bags get recycled, a number that is dwindling due to the collapse of the worldwide market for the specialized plastic used to make the bags. Thurston County's recycling provider, LeMay, will no longer collect the flimsy plastic bags after Sept. 30.

Thurston County's Solid Waste Advisory Committee has spent two years studying a bag ban and crafting a common ordinance it has proposed for all local jurisdictions. The Northwest Grocery Association, which supports the bag ban, says the Thurston ordinance is based on a successful statewide model.

Olympia is expected to adopt the bag ban soon, while Lacey is undecided. The cities of Yelm, Bucoda, Rainier and Tenino remain uncertain about the ban. If some cities don't adopt the bag ban ordinance, Thurston County will have an unfortunate patchwork of local rules.

A countywide ban serves everyone better because it provides consistency for consumers and a level playing field for retailers. We urge Olympia and Lacey to adopt the ordinance without delay.

A partial ban that includes the county's most populated urban areas will remove from the environment the bulk of the estimated 90 million thin grocery bags used every month in Thurston County. In time, the single-use bags will disappear completely.

Reusable grocery bags are slowly becoming common everywhere and a matter of habit. Trying to remember reusable bags — and paying the 5-cent fee when you don't — is annoying at first, an irritant that will eventually recede.

The state Legislature could help. A statewide ban on single-use plastic grocery bags, coupled with a 5-cent fee on paper bags and an effective campaign touting the benefits of reusable bags, would make an elegant solution.

Nobody likes to pay for something they used to get for free. Grocery shoppers now feel entitled to free bags, but it's a convenience our planet can no longer afford.