

## **The green revolution arrives for shopping bags**

By Karen Dillon, The Kansas City Star

It's perhaps the most basic choice we face:

Paper or plastic?

As it turns out, both answers are wrong, environmentalists say. Paper and plastic each have major drawbacks, and some areas nationwide are considering outright bans of plastic bags.

Now, as another Earth Day arrives, a third option is becoming popular here — the reusable cloth bag.

Many grocery stores are offering reusable bags and some have gone even further.

Beginning today, for example, the Whole Foods stores nationwide and locally will no longer offer plastic grocery bags. Instead shoppers may choose free paper bags made from recycled paper, reusable bags made from recycled plastic bottles for 99 cents each or canvas bags that sell for \$6.95 to \$35.

And area Price Choppers have begun offering incentives. They sell 99-cent reusable bags and refund customers a nickel every time they use one.

“The consciousness level of the industry has been raised,” said Dennis Reilly, chief financial officer for Consentino's Price Chopper.

But that doesn't mean plastic bags or paper will immediately go the way of the dinosaur. Aside from Whole Foods, few grocers in the area are banning plastic bags entirely. They are watching how that effort is playing out in other locations where the plastic bag industry is fighting instead for mandatory recycling.

“We want to make sure it is the right decision before we jump into that arena,” said David Ball, president of Ball's Food, which owns Hen House grocery stores. Hen House has offered reusable bags for 10 years and also recycles plastic bags.

Many cities and some states are trying to ban the fly-away non-biodegradable plastic bags. This month Seattle announced plans to impose a 20-cent “green fee” on all disposable shopping bags, aiming at both plastic and paper. The mayor says the city goes through 360 million disposable bags each year.

San Francisco recently banned plastic bags, and Oakland, Calif., is considering a ban. New York and New Jersey require retailers to recycle them, and California is considering a fee to pay for recycling. China, which some consider to among the most ungreen countries in the world, just announced a ban on the lightest plastic bags and a tax on others. In Ireland the plastic grocery bag is almost extinct because of a 33-cent tax per bag. At least seven countries in Africa, including Kenya, have bans or taxes.

So what's the matter with paper and plastic?

Everything, says Phelps Murdock, president and CEO of Bridging The Gap, an environmental group that operates recycling centers in the Kansas City area.

"The object is not to recycle," Murdock said. "The objective is to get to a zero-waste economy. If I have a bag that will last 10 years or 20 years, why do I want to have something that I have to send to a landfill?"

That's where many plastic bags end up. Or they fly into the landscape or float off in rivers, lakes and oceans. They can take 1,000 years to decompose, in the meantime killing wildlife and marine life.

It's not surprising, then, that many believe paper sacks are more green. Not true, say many experts.

Paper sacks, for example, generate 50 times more water pollutants than plastic and take more than four times as much energy to produce, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. But plastic bags, like cigarette butts, are everywhere, and for that reason have garnered a much worse reputation than paper.

More than 100 billion plastic shopping bags are estimated to be used in the United States annually, according to The Wall Street Journal.

In Kentucky, journalist James Bruggers documented a plastic bag that clung to a tree outside his office at the Louisville Courier-Journal for 171 days before floating off. The bag, dubbed "Will I B Banned" by a reader, weathered snow, ice, wind and nearby tornadoes.

In Portland, Ore., take heed if you plan to ride the bus carrying plastic grocery bags, says Andy Graham, a public relations specialist at the Mid-America Regional Council, who used to live there.

Graham said he once witnessed a woman get on the bus with eight or nine bags strung along her arms like bracelets. Bus riders eyed her, and one woman took her to task for using plastic instead of cloth.

The American Chemistry Council is fighting the negative stereotype plastic bags have and created Progressive Bag Affiliates, which represents plastic bag manufacturers, to promote the good side of plastic and lobby governments for stricter recycling laws.

Keith Christman, senior director of Progressive Bag Affiliates, says many groceries recycle plastic bags and have bins near doors to return the bags.

Christman said the bag can be reused around the home as trash can liners, and as litter bags for diapers and pet waste.

“They’re a good environmental choice,” Christman said. “We agree that litter is a problem. Plastic bags don’t belong on the street somewhere, and we are working with people to keep American beautiful.

“Keeping those cloth bags clean could become a challenge.” Vincent Cobb, founder of reusablebags.com in Chicago, said reusable bags hit the nation’s radar screen about two years ago when San Francisco passed a tax. He now has 120,000 customers across the country. Many cloth and canvas bags carry the insignia of a store.

“It’s something that is in the home and it is being reused and it has our logo on it,” said David Patrick, senior vice president and marketing officer for Westlake Ace Hardware. “It is not all that great to have our name on something in the trash.”

The hardware company is about to launch a promotion with bags that carry the logo “Garden Party,” Patrick said.

Paper or plastic?

Paper bags:

- Generate 50 times more water pollutants than plastic bags.
- Weigh nine times more than plastic, taking up more landfill space.
- Take much more energy to recycle and manufacture than plastic.

Plastic bags:

- Were introduced in 1977 but now account for four of every five grocery bags.
- Are made from polyethylene, which comes from crude oil and natural gas — nonrenewable resources.
- Get recycled at only a 1 percent rate, compared to 20 percent for paper.