

Benson wants plastic grocery bags taxed

By Christian Schiavone/Staff Writer
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Acton, Mass. -

If a local legislator has her way, the age-old question — paper or plastic — could get a bit more complicated in the name of going green.

State Rep. Jen Benson, D-Lunenburg, has filed legislation that would levy a 5-cent tax on single-use plastic bags at supermarkets in an attempt to cut the number of bags that wind up in landfills or as litter.

The plan has met with a backlash from the Massachusetts Food Association, which represents more than 500 supermarkets in the commonwealth, and from Republicans who called the proposal for a new tax ill timed given the impact of the economic downturn.

But Benson, whose district includes Boxborough and three of Acton's six precincts, said the bill would convince more shoppers to bring their own reusable bags instead of using plastic bags, which are not biodegradable.

"We really need to make the push now to raise people's awareness. It's time to phase [plastic bags] out," said Benson, who represents Acton and Boxborough. "This is one way to urge people to be more thoughtful about their choices."

Benson compared her tax proposal to the 5-cent deposit currently collected on bottles and cans and said it would not hurt consumers because they could avoid paying the tax either by bringing a reusable bag or asking for paper bags at the checkout counter.

Cory Atkins, D-Concord, who represents the rest of Acton, has also signed onto the legislation. If passed, the revenue generated by the tax would go into the state's general fund. Benson said the bill is aimed at protecting the environment, not raising money.

Massachusetts grocery stores distribute more than 1.5 billion plastic bags each year, according to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

Jim Snyder-Grant, a founding member of the environmental advocacy group Green Acton, said the plan would create a greater incentive for more people to make the extra effort to bring their own bags.

"Using your own sturdy reusable bags when you go shopping has the least impact on the environment," he wrote in an e-mail. "Rep. Benson's bill will help move more people to doing what makes sense. That's what happens when environmental costs are priced into products."

Benson's bill is similar but less aggressive than legislation currently pending in Congress to create a national 5-cent tax on paper and plastic bags in 2010 that would jump to 25 cents per bag in 2015. The city of San Francisco, Calif., banned single-use plastic bags in 2007.

Barney Keller, a spokesperson for the state GOP, said the proposal would place an additional burden on consumers at a time when many are struggling to pay for essentials like food and rent. "It's clear she'll be walking in lock step with the tax and spend wing of the Democratic Party," said Keller.

The proposal has also drawn criticism from the Massachusetts Food Association, as well as local supermarket officials who say they've already begun work on more favorable solutions than an additional tax.

The trade association signed an agreement with the DEP in March setting a goal of reducing distribution of both plastic and paper bags by a third by 2013. Methods to reduce demand for disposable bags include providing customers with incentives to reuse bags and making the reusable bags more accessible.

Jack Donelan, co-owner of the Littleton-based Donelan's Supermarket chain, said the Legislature should give the agreement more time to create results before enacting the new tax.

"It deserves some effort before they start charging consumers a nickel per bag. They need to give the retailers some time," he said. "Reusable bags are the answer."

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