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FEATURED

## City mulling new measure to discourage single-use plastic and paper bags

But measure doesn't include a fee

By Conor Morris Nov 16, 2016



Photo by Dennis E. Powell

The proposed bag-fee law would charge 5 cents per plastic or paper single-use bag at stores that sell food. Above, a shopper loads packed bags into his car in the Athens Kroger parking lot.

Athens City Council is considering bringing forth a new initiative to encourage city residents and retailers to reduce single-use plastic- and paper-bag litter, and to monitor those efforts.

This idea, in the form of a resolution, was discussed during a committee meeting Monday.

City Council, however, is no longer considering charging consumers a fee per each single-use paper or plastic bag used at most retailers in the city, as they were earlier this year. The new resolution in its current draft form does ask the city to take a number of steps to monitor the use and recycling of those bags, as well as the use of reusable bags.

The resolution has another important caveat: If after a year of monitoring, the city's data show that recycling "and/or" bag reuse rates are "below 70 percent," or if disposal and littering of single-use bags does not decline by "30 percent" within that time, the city will consider further efforts to mitigate the "environmental impact" of the single-use bags.

It's not clear what those further efforts will look like.

Athens City Council at-large member Jennifer Cochran explained that the new resolution, which may get the first of three readings during City Council's next meeting, is meant as "somewhat of a compromise."

"This is a way for us to find a middle ground and do some preliminary work that would promote recycling even more, promote the use of reusable (bags) in our stores and in our community, and encourage retailers to provide incentives to customers who bring in their reusable bags and return their bags for recycling," Cochran said. "We'll also be collecting data on the usage and recycling rate of single-use bags in the community, both at the curbside and in our retail establishments that provide an outlet for recycling."

Council member Chris Fahl said she supports the measure, despite being "surprised" by the blowback the city got over the former proposal to attach a 10-cent fee to each paper or plastic single-use bag used by customers at most retail stores.

**Correction:** The original proposal suggested a 10-cent fee per-bag, not a 5-cent fee as The NEWS had previously written.

Mayor Steve Patterson said during the meeting that although he hadn't seen the latest version of the resolution, he had some concerns about the level of data monitoring that the city may make itself responsible for through the resolution.

Cochran responded that the city will work with its Environment and Sustainability Commission and local non-profits to collect the information, which could ease any potential burden on paid city staff.

The proposed resolution essentially acts as a roadmap for how the city and City Council plan to reduce the number of single-use bags used in the city.

Part of the resolution simply encourages retailers and consumers to use reusable bags. The latter half of it does appear to set more active goals for the city, however, including:

- The city will "cooperate with local agencies and stores" to encourage recycling of plastic and paper single-use bags.
- The city will work with local agencies and stores to collect data on the number of single-use bags generated by retailers, the rate of bags returned for recycling and "what happens to returned bags."
- The city will work with retailers to measure "bag reuse" rates, for single-use and reusable bags.
- The city will work with local agencies and groups like Keep Athens Beautiful to conduct an "annual survey" to monitor and measure the amount and sources of litter on roads and in waterways.
- The city will report back to City Council in a year on results of the litter surveys and bag data collected.
- The city will commit to evaluation of appropriate mitigation for the environmental impacts of single-use carryout bags if recycling and/or bag reuse rates remain below 70 percent, or if disposal and littering of single-use bags does not decline by 30 percent by 2018.

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