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## Seeing a Pitched Battle Over Plastic Bags

By [MIREYA NAVARRO](#)

Steven Thrasher usually carries two reusable cloth bags for any impromptu shopping. At the [Ikea](#) store in Brooklyn the other day, he gladly forked over \$1.18 for two of the store's big blue bags, made of durable plastic for repeated use.

But even an environmentally aware New Yorker like Mr. Thrasher cannot shake himself loose of the everyday disposable plastic bag. Friends visit him with food and drink wrapped in plastic. Sometimes, caught without his cloth bags when running into a store for an unplanned purchase, he accepts a plastic bag. For all his good intentions, he has a balled-up pile of them under his kitchen sink, like the rest of us.

"I'd pick up 50 bags a week instead of 2 or 3 if I wasn't conscious of it," said Mr. Thrasher, 31, a freelance writer from Fort Greene, Brooklyn. "You're always having a plastic bag put in your hand."

Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) announced this month that he would push for a 6-cent fee on each plastic bag, both to raise as much as \$16 million a year for the city in its economic slump and to steer New Yorkers toward greener practices — switching to bags they can use over and over.

Yet even those who agree with the idea say the weaning from such a symbol of waste could be particularly difficult, if not painful, in a city with New York's quirks.

In interviews over the past week, many shoppers said the city's largely carless, minimalist style did not easily lend itself to toting canvas or heavier plastic bags around like another accessory. Many also pointed out that the plastic bag is hardly a throwaway — indispensable, they said, for cleaning up after pets, camouflaging the smell of a dirty diaper, hiding an open can of beer or simply holding other trash.

"I'd have to buy garbage bags, which is more plastic again," said Ellen Goldstein, 56, a painter and animator who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Ms. Goldstein agrees that plastic must ultimately go, and she has plenty of cloth bags in her car. But that is where they remained when she caught a ride with a friend to Fairway Market in Red Hook last week.

So while her friend, Sarah Goldman, 42, a baker from Long Island, filled one side of the trunk with reusable bags reading, "There is only one earth," Ms. Goldstein self-consciously filled the other with more than a dozen plastic bags fresh from the store.

"I do feel guilty," she said.

Plastic bags, particularly the flimsy ones that float over windy streets, are widely considered an

environmental nuisance that use up petroleum, litter the landscape, clog storm drains and recycling equipment and linger for centuries in landfills.

City officials are still fine-tuning the details of the surcharge: Which kinds of plastic bags would require one? Is 6 cents — 5 for the city and one for the merchant — enough? While Mayor Bloomberg has called the charge a fee that could be approved by the City Council, the city's top budget official said on Monday that it was a tax and would require approval from the State Legislature.

Several European countries already impose hefty taxes of as much as 33 cents on standard plastic bags. San Francisco has banned them altogether at large grocery stores and pharmacies unless they are biodegradable bags, which are more expensive than regular ones. The news that New York was about to grapple with the issue drew hundreds of comments last week to The New York Times Web site, many of them welcoming the city out of the dark ages.

"How do I clean out my litter box every day?" one New Yorker asked. "What do we use in place of plastic bags? I am serious!"

John of Phoenix replied: "Simply keep the bag the litter came in and pour the used litter back into it. Problem solved."

Lydia of New Jersey said she solved a similar problem by sliding a folded newspaper under her dog "when she squats to do her business."

"Then I simply refold the paper around her droppings and discard the whole thing," she wrote.

But some New Yorkers are not buying the mayor's proposal. Eddie Collins, 57, an unemployed truck driver from Brooklyn, said that if the city were serious about protecting the environment, it would allow residents to recycle plastic bags just as it does paper and glass. The city passed a law this year requiring stores that provide plastic bags to accept them back from customers for recycling into new bags, but there is no such program for homes.

Robert Lange, director of the city's recycling program, said the bags posed a challenge for such large-scale recycling because many are not clean enough to enter the recycling stream and, once there, tend to wrap themselves around other recyclables.

Count Mr. Collins among those willing to pay a tax for plastic. "If I need seven or eight bags, I'm not going to take eight canvas bags with me," he said flatly.

There are, indeed, logistical issues that may make it impractical for many New Yorkers to bring their own reusable bags along when they shop. Most people walk or take the bus and subway, so they have no car trunk in which to carry a number of them. Because so many purchases are spur of the moment — as easy as spotting a storefront and remembering you need candles or toothpaste — sometimes the backpack, briefcase or humongous handbag that can store them are not handy.

And many people have found at least a second use for the single-use plastic bags. Janice Thomas, 47, a nanny in Brooklyn, said she used them to wrap items for her care packages to relatives in Granada. "You fold the stuff up and put them in the bag for shipping," she said.

Mr. Thrasher, the Brooklyn man battling the wad of bags under his sink, finds plastic bags ideal for, of all things, composting. He uses them to store food scraps in the freezer, then takes them once a week to his farmers' market. With a paper bag, he said, "I'd worry it'd rot through."

On rainy days at Luna Deli, a bodega in East Harlem, some customers demand plastic bags even without a purchase.

"They ask for bags to cover their shoes," said David Cortes, a store clerk who said he sometimes charges 5 cents per bag in such cases because "the store pays for those bags — they're not a gift."

Mr. Cortes said he had a front-row seat to the waste: Customers ask for bags even for cigarettes, and to wrap beer cans "so the police don't see them drinking."

"It just creates more trash," said the clerk, who said he agreed with the proposal.

But customers like Bernadette Ojeda, 37, a mother of six, said charging 6 cents was "not right."

"It doesn't make sense to have to carry an empty bag around," she said of the idea of bringing her own bag. "That's what the plastic bag is for."

Environmental groups like [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) support the idea of a surcharge, saying the goal is to make people switch to reusable bags and to conserve resources. "If you end up reusing a plastic bag 5 times or 10 times, that could replace 5 or 10 of the flimsy bags that are now used," said Eric A. Goldstein, a senior lawyer with the council in New York. Whether durable plastic or cotton, the reusable bags are a greener alternative as long as they are, in fact, used and not forgotten in a closet, he said.

But many grocers and retailers oppose the tax, fearing an increased demand for the paper bag, which they point out is more expensive and, because it is bulkier than plastic, requires more space and trucks to deliver. While easily recyclable, paper bags also require killing trees.

Patricia Brodhagen, a spokeswoman for the Food Industry Alliance of New York State, a group that represents grocery store chains like ShopRite and A & P, said the city should give the stores incentive programs — like the nickel that customers get back at some chains if they use their own bags — and the city-mandated recycling program for plastic bags a chance to work. She said it was too early to tell how well that program was doing but "what we've seen as a rule in New York State is that the use of reusables has gone up."

City shoppers already face bans on disposable plastic at stores like Ikea and neighborhood co-op markets.

Ikea started phasing out plastic bags in March 2007 with a 5-cent surcharge per bag. The manager of the Brooklyn store, Mike Baker, said that by the time the bags were eliminated last month, more than 90 percent of customers had either switched to the big blue bags the store sells for 59 cents or decided to load up bag-less, "like Costco."

"There's been no riots," Mr. Baker said.

But the world may have to wait for New York to adjust. Mr. Thrasher, who grew up in California, said the

New York mindset is such that he gets looks whenever he goes out to the corner deli for a pint of ice cream and refuses a plastic bag for it.

“People always think it’s weird, but it’s a 40-second walk from the deli to my house.

“If you can carry it to the cash register,” he said, “you can carry it home.”

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Shoppers at the Ikea in Brooklyn where, according to the store's manager, customers have adjusted to the large 59-cent bags without much difficulty.

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Ikea, which opened a store in Brooklyn in June, started phasing out plastic bags in 2007. Now, customers must pay 59 cents for a durable, reusable plastic sack if they want a bag.

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