

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
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Paper, Plastic--or Neither?

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Background

North Newton's Vision Statement speaks of a "...small town dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all its residents" and a place where "...the physical environment is respected." In recent years actions by the City Government in support of that statement include: a city ordinance to require pet owners to handle pet wastes responsibly; an annual budgetary allocation to support a tree planting program by city residents; the design and construction of an award-winning City Hall; and, a pilot program to encourage wider residential use of energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs. These actions have begun to establish North Newton as a leader in environmental issues and action programs. This note carries those efforts further by addressing the negative environmental impact of the use of light plastic bags in retail trade.

Paper, Plastic or Neither?

A standard question to customers at the retail check-out counters is "Paper or plastic?" Frequently, the response is based more on customer convenience than any careful consideration of the environmental aspects of each. In fact, from an environmental perspective, neither material carries a strong advantage—both plastic and paper consume sizeable amounts of natural resources in manufacture (oil and natural gas in the case of plastic; wood pulp, chemicals and electricity in the case of paper). And both present significant difficulties in disposal after use.

Plastic is lighter and less bulky than paper, but deteriorates very slowly in the landfill (generally estimated to be hundreds of years). Plastic bags that have escaped proper disposal litter vacant lots and adorn fencerows, shrubbery and ditches along roadways. Paper bags are easier to recycle, but weigh 10 times as much per unit of capacity. Recycling of plastic and paper is often recommended, but careful studies indicate that less than 1% of all bags put into use are recycled. The run-up in world oil prices in recent years has reduced the previous cost advantage of plastic bags and heightened concern over use of crude oil in their manufacture.

Because plastic bags have been relatively cheap to produce, are sturdy and easy to carry and store, they have captured an estimated 80% of the grocery and convenience store market in the US since they were introduced a quarter of a century ago. This note encourages the expanded use of reusable tote bags and describes a modest program by the North Newton City Government in that regard. Such a move is likely to be resisted by some on grounds of customer (and retailer) convenience. While consumer choice remains an important option in this matter, it is suggested that this is an issue—like efforts to discourage use of styrofoam cups—where some convenience may have to be surrendered in support of an environmental goal of value to the larger community.

Experience Elsewhere: A Movement Away From Plastic

A number of government entities have taken deliberate steps to reduce the use of plastic bags in retail trade. In 2002 the Government of Ireland imposed a charge at the check-out counter on plastic bags equivalent to about US\$0.33/bag, a move that cut usage by nearly 90% in

a matter of a few weeks. Other countries and cities have followed Ireland's lead. In 2007 the City of San Francisco banned use of plastic bags in supermarkets. Oakland, CA, London and Paris are following San Francisco's example. In 2008 the Chinese Government prohibited all shops, supermarkets and other retail outlets from handing out free plastic bags and, going further, banned the production, sale and use of ultra-thin plastic bags. In response, many shoppers have turned back to the use of woven net shopping bags or plain cloth bags.

A growing number of private businesses, locally and internationally, are also discouraging plastic bag usage and promoting wider use of reusable totes. In December 2007 Dillon Food Stores announced a policy to encourage area-wide sale of reusable shopping bags and more recycling of plastic bags. Dillons now offers two reusable tote bag designs ranging in price from \$0.99 to \$2.99. The Newton Wal-Mart Super Center offers at \$1.00 an attractive bag made of re-cycled plastic. However, store officials note that the volume of total sales is small, as is the recycled volume of white plastic bags. In early 2008 the US-based Whole Foods Market expanded its ban on disposable plastic bags to include all of its 270 stores in the US, Canada and the UK. In May 2008 Marks and Spencer, one of Britain's largest retailers, began charging its customers 5 pence for each disposable plastic bag.

The North Newton Reusable Tote Bag Initiative

In late 2008 the North Newton City Council agreed in principle to implement a modest program aimed at encouraging wider use of reusable totes—and, by that measure, discouraging use of disposable plastic shopping bags. The program, implementation of which is to begin in early 2009, includes:

- An “incentive” component that offers without charge to each North Newton family unit a carefully designed reusable tote. The bag, with flat bottom to facilitate loading and wrap-around carrying straps for strength, is in an attractive earth tone and carries the logo “Going Green in North Newton” in contrasting colors.
- The “educational” component takes the form of a written statement to be signed by the bag recipient which outlines the pros and cons of paper and plastic and reusable totes.

The program will make available 500 bags, or approximately one for each family unit in North Newton, at a total cost of about \$1,800. The program has been developed without resort to use of city tax revenues. Costs have been fully covered through donations from private individuals, Newton-area banks and other local businesses. Names of donors will be printed on the back side of each tote. The positive response by donors to this “green” initiative has been generous and surprising. All have expressed appreciation for North Newton's overall efforts in “going green”. This would appear to be a concept that has growing, broad-based appeal.

The City of North Newton commends the Bethel College Mennonite Church for establishing and supporting the Creation Care Committee. We would welcome ideas from the church of how the City's “green agenda” can be further extended. Thank you for the invitation to prepare this Creation Stewardship Note.