

Title: Plastic Bag Initiative

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Class: ENVS 4100- Appropriate Technology and Sustainability- Ecological Design: The Campus as a Living Laboratory

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Issue:

Western Michigan University's campus stores use an excessive amount of plastic bags. These plastic bags have been contributing to the increased amount of solid waste on campus. Western Michigan University prides itself with becoming a more sustainably campus. President Dunn has signed many initiatives to make this campus a leader in sustainability. Such initiatives include the *Tallories Declaration* and Strategic Sustainability Initiatives Report. Our group feels that the over use of these plastic bags go against the ideals outlined in these documents.

Our proposed initiative is to reduce the amount of plastic bag waste on this campus by implementing a \$.30 fee on plastic bags handed out. Implementing a fee would not just cut down on plastic bag waste, but it would also change customers' behavior towards consumption of plastic bags. We also decided a fee would be better than a ban, because fees are marketed based solutions that get customers to change their consumption habits. Fees are practical for the consumer and the money collected on fees could go towards the problem or other sustainability efforts on campus.

Methodology and Data:

We were informed that the WMU bookstores would be leased to Follett on April 15, 2013. We still wanted this fee to be implemented. We did research on other campuses and cities to see where, if any, of these kinds of fees were being placed. There were many cities and states with polices concerning bans and a few with fees. Also, we did not find a university that had a fee, only bans.

After we found cities with fees, we e-mailed Judy Gipper, the Director of Dining Services at WMU. Dining Services has a ban on plastic bags and we were interested on how this was done. 3 years ago they discontinued use of plastic bags due to environmental concerns. Plastic bags were used in cash operations and carry-out at Draper and late-night. Before they banned plastic bags they considered balance of the cost of action/change, impact on students/ customer service and experience, operational concerns, impact on the environment, and difficulty to implement. With switching plastic to paper and reusable bags they spend \$6,000 per year. For our initiative we are not providing reusable bags or paper bags so there would be no additional cost.

We then contacted Follett about what their company's policy is in bookstores. We had a difficult time calling them so we resorted to email. Their e-mail told us that they ask costumers if they want a bag, but what they are made of and price per bag was confidential. We also contacted Baiba Stepe, she is in charge of the transition, via email about Follett's policy. She responded that she does not know "the exact material the bags are made of and it is our policy NOT to give a bag with every purchase. We do keep bags on and reserve them for transactions where it might prove to be a hardship to remove the merchandise from the store." (Baiba Stepe, personal communication, March 27, 2013). From another e-mail Baiba Stepe informed us that the plastic bags are HDPE. HDPE is high-density polyethylene which is the most common plastic used in America. It is mainly found in milk jugs, plastic bags and refillable plastic bottles. It is a #2 plastic which is recyclable (epsplasticlumber.com, 2013).

We wanted to gauge the reaction of students before and after the implementation of the fee, so we could conclude in future research if habits and reactions have changed. We worked with Marley McVey, who runs the Student Sustainability Survey, on creating a question and if possible to add it to their survey. We wanted to add 3 questions but there was only room for one. The question asked if students would support a surcharge of \$.50 or less at campus stores. 560 responded yes and 570 responded no. We were very surprised to see the results being 50/50. We thought that more students would be opposed to paying extra for a plastic bag. This gave us hope that this fee would work and according to the data students are willing to pay.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Future work to be done would be to implement this fee after Follett is better established and accustomed to Western Michigan University's sustainability efforts and needs. A focus on promoting reusable bags is necessary as a next step towards behavior change that we want to create towards consumption habits. Another project should be to explore and research materials used to make plastic bags and find the most eco friendly plastic bag Western Michigan University could have.

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