

Suffolk lawmakers add 5 cent fee for disposable paper, plastic bags

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Plastic bags filled with groceries from the Stop and Shop in Riverhead on Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2016. (Credit: Randee Daddona)

Paper or plastic, it'll cost you a nickel per bag at store checkouts under a bill passed by Suffolk lawmakers Wednesday night.

The charge would go into effect in 2018, as county lawmakers and environmentalists push consumers to bring reusable bags.

"I'm elated," said the bill's sponsor, Legis. William Spencer (D-Centerport), after the 13-4 vote. "My hope is this will reduce plastic bags, to keep our waterways clean and keep our natural beauty."

County Executive Steve Bellone plans to sign the measure, a spokesman said.

Two Republican and two Democratic lawmakers voted against the bill, saying that Suffolk residents are sick of the high cost of living and getting nickel and dimed by the government.

"I have one of largest senior citizen communities in Suffolk County, and I've gotten an earful," Legis. Sarah Anker (D-Mount Sinai) said. "Being charged for plastic bags is not supported by that community." Legis. Lou D'Amaro (D-North Babylon), Leslie Kennedy (R-Nesconset) and Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) also voted no.

Patricia Ariotti, of Mastic, who spoke against the fee Wednesday, said she double bags her groceries - up to 13 every week. "That adds up," she said.

Grocery store owners and plastic bag manufacturers stayed silent on the fee. Earlier this year, Spencer had proposed a complete ban on the thin "single-use" plastic bags in Suffolk. That version was favored by some environmentalists. But bag manufacturers and grocery store owners said it would cost jobs and drive up costs for consumers.

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Jay Peltz, general counsel of the Food Industry Alliance of New York, said the lobbying group was neutral on the five cent fee. But based on fees elsewhere, like Washington, D.C., he said, "There will be a reduction on plastic bags from the enactment of a fee."

The 5 cent fee would be kept by retailers. But Legis. Thomas F. Barraga (R-West Islip) called it a windfall for retailers. At the least, most of the money should be kept by the county, he said.

The Suffolk bill is similar to legislation passed by New York City earlier this year. Implementation of that bill has been delayed from October to February, after concern from Albany lawmakers over the fee.

Proponents of the fee says the bags litter roadsides and waterways and gum up recycling machines.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said, "Suffolk County has just leaped forward in solving our plastic bag pollution problem."

Similar efforts in Suffolk have failed in 2008 and 2011. Suffolk is the first county in the state outside New York City to pass a 5 cent fee.

A companion bill which passed unanimously created a committee to educate the public about the coming charge and track its success in reducing consumption of disposable bags. Spencer said his goal was to reduce plastic bag use by 70 percent. It would also set a benchmark of how many bags are currently used in the county.

Suffolk legislators delayed a vote on legislation to roll back some fees for false alarms from security systems.

Suffolk police Chief of Department Stuart Cameron opposed the bill, by Legis. Kate Browning (WF-Shirley), which he said undermined efforts to reduce false alarm calls. Cameron and Bellone said they would support a more moderate bill that keeps a biennial cost for alarm systems.

Alarm company owners said they were caught off guard by the fees, and accused the county of trying to boost revenue.