



# Single-use plastic shopping bags

## Waste prevention efforts in Thurston County

### What's the problem?

Thurston County residents use about 90 million plastic shopping bags each year. That figure is based on the low end of the estimated 350 to 500 bags the average American uses annually. Besides the energy and resources used to make bags, they affect our environment and wildlife and create a financial burden on retailers and governments.

### Environmental concerns

Because plastic bags are lightweight, they travel easily through the environment. Even when placed in a trash can, they can become airborne during the collection and disposal process.



The Marine Research Foundation estimates that 100,000 marine mammals die each year because of plastic litter in the North

Pacific Ocean. Whales, dolphins, seals, turtles, and birds mistakenly swallow plastic for food. Smaller marine life and birds routinely become entangled in the bags. Land animals, including livestock are also regularly affected.

### Hidden costs

Retailers in the United States spend about \$4 billion on bags each year and pass costs on to customers. Some stores offer cash back if you bring your own bag.

Governments and taxpayers have to pick up the costs for managing plastic bag litter. Bags also clog gutters and storm drains, which leads to costly flooding.

### What about recycling?

Plastic bags cannot be recycled in our commingled curbside recycling cart because they tangle in equipment at the sorting facility. Some residents put bags in their recycling even though our outreach materials say not to. This costs the recycling facility an extra \$1000 per day.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the nationwide recycling rate for plastic bags is only 4.5 percent despite the availability of collection bins at stores. That means too many bags wind up in the trash. Even when plastic bags are recycled, the material is used to make a lower quality plastic product.



*Workers remove bags from equipment at SP Recycling, Inc.  
Photo courtesy of Waste Connections, Inc.*

### Bags by the numbers

- The average lifespan of a plastic bag is 12 minutes.
- Americans use half a million plastic bags every minute.
- Nearly 200,000 plastic bags are land filled every hour.
- Americans use 30 billion plastic grocery bags each year.
- It takes 12 million barrels of oil to make the bags Americans use each year.

## What are others doing?

Data shows that recycling efforts are just not working. With that in mind, over 50 cities, counties, and even countries have placed bans or fees on single-use bags.



## What can we do here?

Thurston County Solid Waste wants to work with the citizens, cities, retailers, and community groups of Thurston County. Our goal is to develop possible solutions to the problems with bags. Our first step is to coordinate a series of community meetings.

Visit [www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/Plastics](http://www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/Plastics) for more information. On this page you'll find a schedule of community events and studies and reports about bags. You can also learn what actions other jurisdictions are taking to address this problem. Visit this page to sign up for periodic emails on this issue and planned events.

Thurston County Solid Waste encourages residents to use durable bags to prevent waste in the first place. We hope you will join us in the upcoming community dialog about single-use plastic bags, so we can make a difference in Thurston County.



Thurston County Solid Waste  
9605 Tilley Road SW  
Olympia, WA 98512



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## B.Y.O.Bag reminders

Remembering to bring your reusable bags when you shop is like learning any new habit - you can do it with time and practice.

- Make "bring shopping bags" the first item on your grocery list.
- Keep a bag at the office, in your purse, or in your briefcase.
- Hang the bags on your front door knob, or place them with your car keys.
- Make yourself a colorful door hanger for the house.
- Put the bags back in your car right after you empty them.
- Keep your bags in the front seat of your car so you can see them.
- Place a "grab the bags" sticky note on your dash or car door handle.
- Give your little ones the job of remembering the bags when you go shopping.
- Charge yourself a dollar every time you forget your bags. Donate the money to charity.

Tell us how you remember your reusable bags!  
Email [ThurstonSolidWaste@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:ThurstonSolidWaste@co.thurston.wa.us).

