

PILOT FOR A REUSABLE BAG SYSTEM

Reuse ideas for business or non-profits to support plastic bag bans

Ideas provided by Maureen McCarthy, Co-Chair of the NoCo Recycle Colorado Council and Renga Subramanyam.

Context and Research:

The recent plastic bag bans, in Fort Collins and other cities in Colorado, do not fully address the environmental issues around shopping bags. For one, providing paper bags as an option, even for a fee, may be detrimental because of the higher life cycle impact of paper bags vs. plastic retail bags (PRBs)¹. Another consideration is that reusable shopping bags (LDPE² and NWPP bags³) which are available in many stores and supermarkets are better for the environment but come with important caveats as below.

According to a [“Lifecycle Assessment of Grocery Bags used in Common Use the US”](#) study by Clemson University in the US, studying the impact of single use plastic bags, paper bags, and reusable LDPE and NWPP plastic bags:

- 1) “Paper (40% Recycled Content) bags have about 7.5 times the average environmental impact compared to plastic retail bags. Increasing the recycle content of paper bags to 100% reduces this factor to about 4 times.”
- 2) ...“reusable LDPE and NWPP bags will have lower average impacts on the environment compared to plastic retail bags **if the reusable bags are reused for a sufficient number of grocery shopping trips**. However, according to a recent national survey, **a majority of consumers do not reuse their reusable bags for this sufficient number of trips**, especially for LDPE bags. Moreover, **40% of people forget to bring their reusable bags with them to the store and half the people who prefer NWPP bags used PRBs** on their most recent shopping trip.”

Common Bags at Grocers:

PRB=
Plastic Retail Bag

The most common disposable plastic bags found at most supermarkets and grocery stores.

LDPE=
Low Density Polyethylene



NWPP=
Non-Woven Polypropylene



In fact, many of these reusable bags, especially the NWPP type, end up being donated to thrift stores, or prematurely thrown away which increases their environmental impact. It appears that having too many reusable bags is a [pretty common problem](#) these days.

The goal and rationale: To change behavior away from single use towards reusables rather than paper or plastic PRB bags and get **more** people to use reusable bags when grocery shopping, including those that may have forgotten to bring their own reusable bag. To minimize the impact of grocery shopping through changing behavior.

- This is a response to the bag ban
- This can impact how many bags large grocery chains purchase/offer for “recycling.”

Process: Bags are obtained

(A) Bags are washed/sanitized

(B) Bags could be embellished with store logo/kudos/sticker

(C) Separate bins are available in each store for taking a clean bag or leaving a bag.

Where to get the bags: NO NEED TO ORDER NEW!!

1. ARC Thrift
2. “Leave one” (explained below)
3. Goodwill
4. T-shirt method
5. Freecycle
6. Nextdoor
7. Craig’s list

The ARC Thrift Store in Fort Collins said they could (currently) provide 50-100 gently used reusable bags a week.

Where to wash the bags:

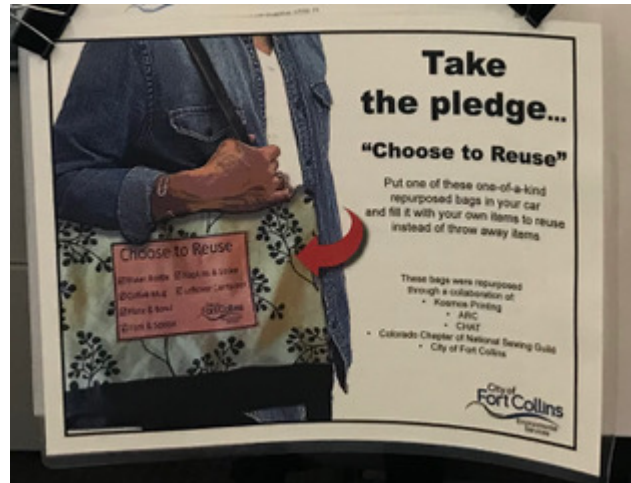
1. Laundromat
2. Grant for a washing machine
3. Grocery stores contract out to wash uniforms - add these bags

Data you may need before doing anything:

1. How many people leave the store with plastic bags, how many leave with reusables?
2. How many plastic bags are leaving the store every day?
3. How much money would the store save by not purchasing plastic bags? How much do they pay for plastic and paper bags now?

“LEAVE ONE” How it works:

- Signage explains:
 1. These bags were donated, washed, and sanitized.
 2. Take one, keep it in your trunk for next time!
 3. Donate your reusable bags here.
- When possible, volunteers are there helping.
- If volunteers are not available, will have to rely on signage.
- Meeting with staff to explain the process of “take one/leave one.”
- There is a large container for “leave one.” These will be washed/disinfected and returned to the “take one” area.
- Stores could have their logo with their sustainability pledge on the bag labels. See sample of what local seamstresses created for the “**Choose to Reuse**” campaign.



Who is needed for the actual tasks?

1. Data takers
2. Folks to help keep things looking tidy and keeping things stocked
3. Bag washers
4. Seamstresses
5. Designers
6. Print Shop

Can you collaborate with environmental organizations for sponsorships?

[HERE](#) is an example of a group “Boomerang Bags” in NC making this program work!



Questions:

- Is this a non-profit organization's activity? OR...could this be a business?
- Can you do a life-cycle assessment of the bags? Chain of materials, transport etc. Include this data. [\(Check out chico bag story\)](#)
- Do customers buy these?
- Do grocers pay for the service?
- Can this be self-supporting? **If yes, then build a business model.**

Remember: Grocery stores have a plan for every square inch of their facilities! Everything is strategically placed, and they would not be interested in bags taking up that valuable space.

Background: Maureen McCarthy and Alexis Hmielak created a bag project used at Outreach Events while working for the City of Fort Collins, in collaboration with these local businesses. Please email maureenmccarthyco@gmail.com for more detailed information.

If you are a business looking for a way to supply bags to customers once Colorado bag bans are in place (2023), please have a look and let Recycle Colorado know if you implement any of them!