

FEATURED

Reusable totes gain popularity in Fairbanks

Julie Herrmann/For the News-Miner Feb 15, 2014



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A rack of reusable grocery bags on display at Fred Meyer West on Airport Way Wednesday morning, February 5, 2014. The store recently stopped giving customers a 5-cent refund per bag for using reusable bags.

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FAIRBANKS — Reusable bags are multiplying across Fairbanks. The soft floppy totes are sold at stores around Fairbanks and are often given out by businesses as well.

Big box retailers have long offered the totes for sale at checkout, touting them as a “green” alternative to plastic and paper. Fred Meyer, Walmart and Safeway all offer reusable bags for sale at or near the checkout line. Local printers also have noticed a sharp increase in the number of businesses wanting their logo and name printed on reusable bags.

“We’ve had quite a few orders lately for different reusable totes,” said Interior Graphics and Printing owner Michelle Maynor. “We actually have some that we use for our customers.”

Trademark, a Fairbanks printing and engraving company, sends its smaller orders out the door in reusable bags and has seen orders for printed bags explode.

“Maybe two years ago, we would get an order or two a year,” said Ron Macom, the owner of Trademark. “Lately, we’ve had probably three or four orders in the past two months. Throughout 2013, probably two or three dozen.”

For several years, Fred Meyer offered customers a 5 cent refund per reusable bag they used at checkout to encourage customers to not only buy reusable bags, but to keep bringing them back and reusing them. A few months ago, Fred Meyer stopped offering the refund, informing customers that the program was a success since customers are using more reusable bags.

“The consumer has changed their behavior and bring their own bags,” said Melinda Merrill, a Fred Meyer spokeswoman. “They don’t do it for 5 cents. They do it because they realized it’s better, and they will continue to use them.”

Safeway shopper Gene Baalam carried a Fred Meyer reusable bag when he shopped last Friday. “I never really liked those plastic bags,” Baalam said, “I think about once they get thrown in the garbage, what happens then?”

Fred Meyer shopper Bonita Post usually brings reusable bags to the store. "I've gotten into the habit, and I use them all the time," Post said. "I even make my own."

Some customers still like the standard plastic grocery bag. Frequent Fred Meyer shopper Nanci Jones uses reusable bags at Sam's Club, which sells reusable bags and doesn't offer bags at checkout, but likes getting plastic ones at Fred Meyer. She reuses them as trash bags, packing material and more.

"They're good for traveling," Jones said. "They make a great shower cap when I forget mine."

Proponents of reusable bags say the bags are environmentally friendly by keeping thousands of plastic bags out of landfills and can carry more items than plastic. Proponents of plastic say plastic bags are usually reused around the house and that reusable bags can spread disease from leaking liquids if not cleaned frequently.

Some cities, like Portland, Ore., have banned plastic grocery bags altogether. Other cities levy a tax of a few cents on every plastic bag a customer uses.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough considered such a tax back in 2009. The ordinance required that all large retailers in the borough tax customers 5 cents per plastic bag used. The profits would go toward a borough recycling program. Many members of the public called the tax premature, and it was rescinded Oct. 8, 2009, a month after it was adopted, without ever going into effect.

Several options available for recycling plastic bags

Customers who use plastic bags have several options for recycling them. Fred Meyer, Safeway and Walmart all have bins for plastic bags in their stores, but don't accept any other recyclables. The recycled bags are collected and hauled out of Fairbanks for recycling.

Most recycled plastic bags are turned into composite lumber, a durable wood product made of plastic and sawdust. Plastic bags also can be reused the same way as reusable bags by taking them back to the store and reusing them for groceries.

Another common way of recycling plastic grocery bags is reusing them around the home. Lining trash bins, picking up after pets, lining kitty-litter buckets, storing items to keep them dust-free, carrying lunch or wet laundry, protecting surfaces during painting projects and tying them over plants to protect them from a freeze are all common ways to reuse plastic bags.

One unique way to up-cycle a plastic bag is to use it as a crafting medium. The bags can be cut into strips and then knit, crocheted or woven into a reusable bag or tote.