

Paper or plastic?

No taxation without proper allocation

By Benjamin Payne

Chicago has a new tax on disposable paper and plastic bags. You might think that in a place as progressive as Chicago, it would be a popular policy. It certainly is among the 45 aldermen who voted to adopt it, but when you ask “real” Chicagoans, it’s a different story.

“They tax us for everything!”

“It’s terrible.”

“It should be canceled. Should. Be. Canceled!”

These are just some of the comments I’ve heard at the grocery store in my current city of Chicago.

Only one person told me they think it’s a good policy, likening it to Washington D.C.’s bag tax that has raised millions of dollars for environmental causes.

That’s what you call false equivalence.

Revenue from the district’s 5-cent bag tax goes toward the city’s environmental department — in particular, a special fund for restoring the Anacostia River. And all of those nickels really do add up: about \$10 million went to the fund in the first five years of its implementation, according to the *Washington Post*.

The city says it has used that money to help subsidize green roofs for residents, send public school students on environmental field trips to Chesapeake Bay and install trash traps throughout the watershed (where, ironically, the traps will collect the very plastic bags that paid for them).

The overall effectiveness of the district’s bag tax remains a topic of debate — an audit by the city found its environmental department lacking in compliance to the law that created the tax — but the fact of the matter is that the district’s bag tax revenue helps fund environmental stewardship.

Revenue from Chicago’s 7-cent surcharge, on the other hand, isn’t earmarked for any environmental cause, of which there are many in Chicago. Rather, the city’s general municipal fund receives 100 percent of the tax — just one of a litany of levies passed last year in an effort to balance the city’s budget.

So, is Chicago’s tax “among the strongest pollution reduction policies in the nation,” as the local

organization Bring Your Bag Chicago has called it? Absolutely not.

But by amending just one line of the ordinance, it could be.

Instead of directing the revenue to Chicago’s general fund — where it’s prone to go toward environmentally unfriendly policies such as greenfield development — aldermen should direct it to the Chicago River Corridor Development Plan.

There, it can help the city execute its “Great Rivers Chicago” initiative, an ambitious vision of making the Chicago, Calumet and Des Plaines rivers “inviting, productive and living places” by 2040. I say “ambitious” because pollution has always been a problem here: with more than 1,800 square miles of land draining into the city’s rivers, no wonder about two-thirds of Chicagoans interviewed by a city focus group reported litter or odor on their riverways.

Put another way, St. Patrick’s Day isn’t the only time the Chicago River turns green.

Needless to say, the city needs all the help it can get in bringing about more beautiful riverways.

But just how much help can a measly 7-cent bag tax bring? Quite a lot: \$13 million each year, according to city estimates. That’s the kind of money Chicago needs to hit some of its benchmark goals: a wetland park on Goose Island, a riverfront transit hub on Chicago’s southwest side and a continuous 30-mile trail on the Chicago River.

Getting rid of the tax altogether — as some of my current neighbors insist — won’t raise the kind of money needed to deliver on these kinds of public-works projects. To do right by the citizens and the environment of Chicago, all it takes is a line-item amendment to specify where the tax revenue goes so that it can do the best possible good.

It’s time for skeptics of city government like myself to quit wishing away every tax. It’s time for us to engage in dialogue with our lawmakers so they might enact environmentally just laws.

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