

## Students push plastic bag tax, get advice in return

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MONTPELIER – Three Bristol high school students were unsure of the reaction they would get this week as they asked lawmakers to approve a new tax on the use of plastic grocery bags.

But they probably weren't expecting advice.

"You should be a little more conservative with your numbers here," suggested Rep. Jim Condon, D-Colchester. "And you should be as specific as possible in the text to make sure there are no bullet holes."

Torin Olivetti, 18, Cooper Thompson, 17, and Alex Horn, 17, all students at Mt. Abraham Union Middle/High School in Bristol, appeared before the powerful House Ways and Means Committee Tuesday morning to push a controversial idea.

That idea: Levy a 6 cent fee on each plastic bag given out by stores in Vermont in a dual effort to encourage further use of reusable bags and to raise new revenue for a state budget damaged by the economic recession.

"We use plastic bags for everything from the grocery store to the mall," explained Horn. "But these bags aren't great for the environment, so we started thinking of ways to discourage people from using them and encourage them to switch to reusable bags."

While lawmakers were not interested in picking up the bill for consideration this year (Rep. Michael Obuchowski, D-Rockingham, the chair of the committee, told the students they were busy working on Senate bills), they did give the students advice on how to build momentum behind their proposal.

Rep. David Zuckerman, P-Burlington, suggested changing the language in the bill from a tax to a fee. Rep. David Sharpe, D-Bristol, suggested that they reach out to counterparts in nearby New Hampshire and begin building a grassroots movement for the proposal.

"I think this is a great idea," said Rep. Alison Clarkson, D-Woodstock. "In Europe, there isn't this expectation that Americans have that we get free bags when we buy something."

Organizations representing Vermont grocers and retailers are opposed to the idea of a bag tax – but they couldn't help getting caught up in the enthusiasm that the students brought to the issue.

"This would be a tax on consumers at a time when the economy is hurting," said Jim Harrison, the president of the Vermont Grocers Association. "That said, we support the idea of helping shoppers switch to reusable bags instead of disposable ones."

Tasha Wallis, the executive director of the Vermont Retailers Association, said Vermonters often reuse plastic bags from stores to carry out their recycling or placing in small wastebaskets. Many stores are now offering bins to recycle the plastic bags, she added.

"We would be happy to work with this group to find a solution that works for Vermont," she said.

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