

Bag recycling bill passes committee

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RALEIGH — Drugstores, big-box destinations such as Target and other large retailers would have to provide recycling bins for plastic bags under a proposal put forward by Greensboro Rep. Pricey Harrison.

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Most grocery stores already provide recycling bins for the bags they give to customers. Harrison's legislation would make such programs mandatory for any retailer in the state that has more than 10,000 square feet of space, whether that be all in one store or divided among several stores.

The measure gained approval from the General Assembly's Environmental Review Commission on Monday, a critical step before Harrison can begin drafting the bill into law.

Harrison, a Democrat, said there are multiple concerns about bags.

They include littering, taking up space in landfills and the use of oil to manufacture them.

"There's got to be a better way than a landfill to handle them," she said.

California was the first state in the nation to make recycling for large retailers mandatory. Other governments have considered banning bags altogether or taxing them. Neither of those steps are part of Harrison's plan as currently drafted.

"I would guess that would be an absolute nonstarter," she said.

"We respect what she's trying to do to clean up the environment," said Andy Ellen, a lobbyist with the N.C. Retail Merchants Association, a Raleigh-based trade group. "But even those stores that do it already don't think it should be mandatory."

Although some retailers offer cloth reusable bags, Ellen said customers overwhelmingly prefer plastic.

In part, he said, plastic bags are the least expensive of common options, something that is important with grocery prices rising.

"Our goal is to give customers what they want," Ellen said.

Harrison said there were still kinks to be worked out of the bill.

For example, some plastic bags are made out of biodegradable material such as corn starch, and mixing those in with other plastic bags can cause problems for recyclers.

Her bill was one of several the Environmental Review Commission gave tentative approval Monday.

Others would put measures in place to combat drought, study the use of stricter emissions standards for cars and provide for greater regulation of underground storage tanks.

All those, including the plastic-bag bill, would have to be passed by the full House and Senate before becoming law.

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