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Big business big winner in Miller's stunning giveaway

November 27, 2008

ROYSON JAMES

In a stunning reversal hatched in private with big business, Mayor David Miller is backing a plan to charge shoppers "a minimum 5 cents" per plastic bag received in Toronto malls, retail stores, supermarkets and corner stores.

The money, essentially a tax on consumers, could boost retail revenues by \$23 million each year. Using the mayor's own accounting, the average shopper could be paying an extra \$21.85 a year.

The cash goes straight into the pockets of retailers – the very people who, until the private deal was struck, were being told by the city to pay customers 10 cents for every bag the consumer declined to take at stores.

When retailers balked at the original proposal at a public meeting at city hall earlier this month, they set out to quietly hammer out a new deal with city staff. The result, unveiled yesterday with the mayor's imprimatur, is an unreasonable policy wrapped up in a reasonable principle to make it more palatable.

Now, the onus shifts to the consumer and away from the producer of the garbage. The producer is the beneficiary; the citizen is the poor sucker who must pay again.

Yes, people pay attention to their waste habits when they are hit in the wallet. That's a sound principle. And it means consumers will pay attention to the number of bags they take home. But the principle should apply to industry as well as consumers. If anyone is to be taxed for the benefit of the environment, it should be the retailers who have been asked and lobbied for decades to be better stewards of the products they sell.

"This isn't about taxes," Miller said yesterday, shilling for the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, who managed to land a sweet deal for themselves on the backs of the consumer. "It's about the environment."

Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker, chair of the works committee and the driving force behind forcing retailers to change their habits and pay to reduce waste going to landfill,

was less unequivocal.

"We could have won the vote to do a mandatory rebate program. We would have won but we'd be fighting all the industry folks for the next five years," De Baeremaeker says.

So, instead of battling the heavyweights of commerce, the politicians caved in and sold out the consumer, their constituents.

Challenged to show how this wasn't a tax, De Baeremaeker said: "A tax goes to government; this stays with the retailer."

And how is that a good thing? Why didn't the city insist that the 5-cent surcharge go back to the public, to pay for recycling and composting costs, for example? The grocers agreed to the deal, voluntarily. They should have been pressed to donate the 5 cents. Result? Win-win for the people who elect the city councillors.

The city worked out a sweetheart deal with business that does nothing for the public. Faced with a penalty, business gets a windfall. And this is supposed to be good for us.

City officials wouldn't say how they arrived at the 5-cent cost per bag. Plastic industry estimates say each bag costs more like 1.5 cents, which means the retailer is pocketing a 200 per cent profit per bag.

This is a giveaway to the private sector, a \$23 million gift to retailers – an early Christmas present. And it comes, aided and abetted by Santa Claus on Nathan Phillips Square, using the people's charge card. Soon, the pop manufacturers and coffee shops will be asking, "What about us?"

Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Email: rjames@thestar.ca