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Valerie Griffith and her sons Brandon, 9, and Ian, 15, load shopping bags of groceries into the car trunk at the Fred Meyer store in Ballard on Friday. (Scott Eklund / P-I)

Impending bag fee brings change to grocery check stands

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In 38 years of working for Fred Meyer, Mike Buentemeier has seen a lot change, from checkers ringing up customers on electronic scanners, to shoppers ringing themselves up.

One afternoon this week, there was another sign in the rows of check-out stands at the Ballard Fred Meyer, where he's a manager, that a simple trip to the market is changing again.

More so than just a couple of years ago, customers bring their own reusable bags and hand them over to be filled -- somewhat awkwardly -- on top of the check-out counter, he said.

By the stands, another sign: a rack of reusable bags in leopard print.

From Buentemeier's vantage point, the 20-cent-per-bag fee that goes into effect in Seattle on Jan. 1 already has brought choices and changes -- some unforeseen -- to life at the supermarket, such as when Marvin and Sandra Fenswick walked in. She had a purse; he, two empty, reusable shopping bags.

They were the plain, black kind. Bringing their own bags to the store was change enough apparently without carrying around leopard-print bags of groceries.

"I'm not about to start paying for plastic bags," Sandra Fenswick said, adding that the couple started bringing their own bags about five months ago, when they heard about the coming fee.

But as the number of people who bring their own bags to the supermarket has increased -- allowing Fred Meyer, for instance, to order 3.5 million fewer plastic bags in 2007 than in 2006 -- there are new decisions for

customers.

At the check-out stand, shoppers like the Fenswicks said they might no longer face the seemingly dire question -- paper or plastic.

Say you forget your reusable bags in the car. Do you go back to get them?

Sometimes she'll go to the trouble, Sandra Fenswick said, laughing.

And then there's the pressure, said Helen Ridder, who was at the Ballard store with both PCC Natural Markets and Fred Meyer reusable bags.

Her 11-year-old daughter "can be pretty cranky if I bring back a plastic bag," she said.

So she leaves extra reusable bags in the car to avoid her daughter's wrath.

At the Ballard Fred Meyer, Mark Stenwell said he switched last year partly for environmental reasons -- but also for one practical concern: the handles of reusable bags don't tear off like the paper or plastic ones, sending eggs cracking on the sidewalk.

Representatives of QFC and Safeway also have seen a change. QFC donates 3.5 cents to The Nature Conservancy every time a customer brings a reusable bag to the store, said QFC spokeswoman Kristin Maas. Last year, it donated $37,000 to the group, compared with $21,000 in 2006.

The Washington Food Industry, a trade group representing independent grocery stores, prefers rewarding customers who bring their own bags with a small discount to the bag tax. The group is trying to gather enough signatures to force a citywide vote on the bag fee.

For now, life's changing for grocery checkers, too.

Fred Meyer declined to let checkers speak to a reporter, but Buentemeier pointed out the plastic bags conveniently hanging from a hook about waist-high behind the counter.

Just take the milk and lay it in. Take the lettuce and drop it in.

There's no place to hang the reusable bags, he said. So checkers lay them on the counter, reach up and slide the groceries down inside.

So the layout behind the counter will change, he said.

When the store is remodeled next year, Fred Meyer will add a shelf about waist high behind the counter -- just for reusable bags.

"It's the future," Buentemeier said, pointing to where the new shelves would be.

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