

Plastic-bag princess fights fixed-thinking foes

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Mike Thomas/Yukon News

Marion Nigel of 3 Beans was recently whacked by a customer who was unhappy over her no plastic bags policy.

Recently, a disgruntled patron slapped 3 Beans owner Marion Nigel with Swiss chard.

Nigel was helping load groceries into another customer's trunk when an older man shuffled up behind her and whapped her over the head with the leafy green.

"Not even a paper bag?" he reportedly grumbled.

People are used to complimentary plastic and paper bags, and don't like being denied the freebies, said Nigel.

Sometimes, they react unpredictably.

"Change threatens people," said Nigel recently as her staff bunched carrots and sorted cilantro around her.

"We have probably had five people who have been terrible. They been physically accosting, and there's no place for that," said Nigel.

Though they've been encouraging customers to bring their own bags and boxes since last October, 3 Beans

only got serious about the initiative in March.

Despite the messages, issued via word-of-mouth and by signs, some customers made it all the way to the till unaware of the store's new policy.

On one occasion, two angry customers fed off each other until they were yelling together at one of the cashiers.

“It's the age of entitlement. 'I'm entitled to a bag,'” sighed Nigel, shaking her head.

To help head off potential plastic-and paper-bag bullies, 3 Beans moved its policy against disposable bags to a more prominent position.

The warning to customers now sits at eye-level atop the till: “Reminder: 3 Beans is a plastic-grocery-bag-free store. We have joined the world effort to reduce the usage of plastic bags.”

On April 2, the northern Manitoba mining town of Leaf Rapids became the first Canadian community to ban single-use plastic bags.

Under the bylaw, a shop owner can be fined \$1,000 each day for distributing what had become “a very visible component of litter.”

In Alaska, the 850-strong village of Galena phased out plastic bags in its three stores starting in 1999, partly to reduce the number of plastic bags that were escaping the dump as unsightly artificial “snow birds” along roads and in trees.

In April, San Francisco passed legislation banning major stores from distributing plastic bags. That ban begins in October.

In 2002, the Republic of Ireland imposed a levy of about 25 cents in Canadian funds on every plastic shopping bag given out.

Apparently, the incentive led to a 95 per cent reduction in plastic-bag distribution.

Whitehorse has no plans to tax or ban single-use grocery bags.

“We don't have anything in place nor do we have anything formal coming forward at this point,” said city manager Dennis Shewfelt.

The city's approach to garbage — moving to using no-bag garbage carts for residential waste — will at least help reduce the need to use plastic bags for garbage, he said.

But without a plastic-bag recycling program, residents will have nowhere to put their growing collection of plastic except straight into the trash.

The city is engaged in the “educational element” of shopping bag reuse, but that's all for now, Shewfelt said.

“(Banning plastic bags) is one of those things you're going to have to have community support for,” he concluded.

Though the ultimate goal of “zero waste” was voiced at the recent sustainability open house, no one suggested restricting disposable bags, said city planning manager Leslie Cabott.

The Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce isn't onboard with a plastic-free policy either, according to Rick Karp.

“I don't think something like that can be restricted to just the city or just a business. I think everyone would have to be involved in something like that,” he said.

Karp thinks it is fine for businesses to opt for bag-reuse policies on their own but that it would be difficult to get businesses, especially major grocers Superstore and Wal-Mart, onside with a city-wide policy.

Nigel, for one, has put her money where her plastic was.

Since October, the 3 Beans owner estimates she's sunk \$10,000 into thousands of tan canvas bags featuring her store's logo, small drawstring bags for tykes, medium open-bags for casual shoppers and larger reinforced zip-up bags for heavy loads.

She's been giving them away. For free.

The cost of the bags was not buried in store prices either, she insisted.

“That's \$10,000 I have given from my salary as a donation to the North. That is how committed I am,” said Nigel.

This summer she's bought a new cheaper bag made from recycled plastic soda bottles (they cost \$1 a pop) to continue the give-away for tourists.

Nigel hopes that when they take memories of Yukon home, they'll take a new habit too.

But 3 Beans is still not entirely plastic free.

When the Yukon News paid a visit, Nigel's employees were slicing and wrapping watermelon — in plastic — to give out as a thank you to canvas bag re-users.

Clear produce bags are available, but Nigel recommends customers wash them out and reuse them for their next trip down veggie lane.