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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
On Intro 209, in Relation to Reduce the Use of Carryout Bags
November 19, 2014**

Good afternoon. My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you to Chair Reynoso and to Councilmembers on the Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management for the opportunity to testify.

I'm speaking today as someone who cares deeply about how New York City manages its garbage. The City spends more than \$2 billion annually to manage its solid waste. Of this amount, we spend \$300 million each year to haul our trash to landfills in other states. It also costs the environment 40 million miles of diesel trucks traveling between New York City and states as far away as South Carolina, and the stuff that we send to landfills generate over 675,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas.

If you know me, you would know that I am a big proponent of waste reduction. We don't have to throw away what doesn't need to be sent to landfills. For years starting since I was a Councilmember, I have worked with the Department of Sanitation, and later on with the Department of Education, to divert organic wastes out of our schools and residential buildings' garbage streams. The rationale behind organic waste diversion is simple: Food scraps should be treated as a resource for composting into fertilizer or generating renewable energy. Removing this very useful portion of waste from the overall tonnage trucked to landfills is an environmentally responsible policy.

But what about garbage that has no reusable value, like carryout bags that are used once to transport groceries between the store and

home and then get discarded? Disposable bags cannot get taken out of the garbage stream like organic wastes—they *are* the garbage—nor are they biodegradable. So the stemming of disposable bags must start from the consumer level, which is why I support Intro 209 to impose a 10-cent fee on carryout bags as a way to dis-incentivize the use of single-use bags.

After implementing its single-use plastic bag ban on July 1, 2011, the County of Los Angeles saw a 95% reduction in single-use bags at stores covered by the bag ordinance. Similarly, the City of San Jose reports that, one year after implementing its “Bring Your Own Bag” Ordinance, the city saw approximately 89% reduction in bag litter in storm drain systems, 60% reduction in creeks and rivers, and 59% in city streets and neighborhoods. Observations of instances of reusable bag usage in San Jose increased from 4% before implementation to 62% after one year of implementation. In fact, local ordinances like these in LA and San Jose are so successful in achieving its goal of plastic bag usage reduction that in September 2014, Governor Brown of California signed a plastic bag ban into law for the entire state.

It is time for New York City to follow the proven results in LA, San Jose, and other cities to discourage single-use carryout bags. With over 8 million New Yorkers averaging 12 new disposable bags used every week, each bag that is cut out from the waste stream will go towards reducing the 1.7 million tons of discarded carryout bags that make up the City’s residential garbage per year. It currently costs \$10 million each year to send the City’s disposable bags to landfills. Even if we only reach a fraction of Los Angeles’ 95% single-use bag reduction, that can still potentially translate into millions of dollars of savings for New York City every year.

Now, I know this bill raises concerns from the plastic bag industry, claiming that the 10-cent fee is a “regressive tax,” that implementation will threaten 2,000 manufacturing and recycling jobs in New York State, and that instead of reducing overall carryout bag usage, the City should

focus instead on recycling. Here are my answers to the industry's concerns:

The 10-cent fee is NOT a “regressive tax.” First, the 10-cent charge is a fee and not a tax, meaning the entire amount that consumers pay for a bag will go to the businesses and not to the City. Second, it is an avoidable charge. Consumers are encouraged to bring their own reusable bag—this is the intent of the proposed bill—and organizations such as Citizens Committee will work with the Department of Sanitation to ensure people who need reusable bags receive them through targeted outreach efforts. Third, the current language of the bill exempts SNAP and WIC recipients from the fee, so the 10-cent charge, in addition to being option, will not affect those who are most economically vulnerable among the City's population.

New York State can *gain* 2,000 workers in environmentally sustainable manufacturing. Rather than seeing a threat of 2,000 jobs lost as the plastic bag industry claims, I believe the bill will be a catalyst that sparks innovation and encourage New York State manufacturers to transition into making reusable bags and other environmentally sustainable products. Transitioning into greener manufacturing is often encouraged by state and local governments. In California, the state will provide \$2 million in competitive loans to help plastic bag businesses transition into making reusable bags. In New York State, the NYS Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) offers numerous grant opportunities for manufacturing Green, sustainable, and energy efficient products. If a grant program or loan product is not already available for manufacturing reusable bags, then I encourage my colleagues at New York State legislature to work with NYSERDA to offer programs that will encourage manufacturers to transition into making sustainable products.

Let's reduce plastic bag usage *in addition* to encouraging recycling and reuse. There is almost no market demand for recycling plastic bags—less than 5% of all plastic bags are recycled, and this is

already a generous estimate because plastic bags are usually counted among other more recyclable plastic films for this statistic. According to a recently published article in the Tulane Environmental Law Journal analyzing Intro 209, plastic carryout bags often hinder municipal recycling by becoming caught in recycling processing equipment, causing recycling sort lines to go offline while waiting for plastic bags to be removed. Plastic bags also require extra energy and costs in the recycling process, which is why Sims Municipal Recycling in NYC supports the proposed bill. According to Sims, residents would try to recycle plastic bags on the curbside, however these bags cannot be recycled because there is currently no market for dirty plastic bags.

The American Progressive Bag Alliance is proposing to set up plastic bag recycling programs in NYCHA buildings in lieu of supporting Intro 209 to reduce overall carryout bag use. Now, I fully support introducing recycling into NYCHA—for years, I worked with Joan Levine of Morningside Gardens, a member of the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board, to introduce plastic, metal, and paper recycling in the Grant Houses. When recycling first started in that NYCHA development, it was the first in all of NYC to have recycling.

If the plastics industry wants to promote recycling in NYCHA, that is wonderful. But it should not be pitted against Intro 209, and in order to go about it most sensibly and effectively, the focus should be on recycling items that have a viable recycling market such as plastics, metal, and paper recycling. Or we can collaborate on how to introduce organic waste diversion among NYCHA developments, since organic waste also has a valuable market through composting and renewable energy generation. I absolutely want to see recycling happen in NYCHA, but not of plastic bags that can be prevented from entering NYCHA developments from grocery and retail stores to begin with. Let's promote reduced usage of carryout bags *and* recycling of marketable wastes.

I want to conclude by mentioning that my hope is to see Intro 209 becoming a law that can serve as a stepping stone to further environmentally responsible waste management practices. The current bill does not apply to restaurants, but perhaps one day it will. LA's example is encouraging: in July 2014, the City of LA bag ordinance expanded to include all food retailers. Imagine the amount of single-use bags we can save from takeout and delivery services.

Thank you again for the opportunity to voice my support for Intro 209 today. I look forward to continue working with the committee and with the Department of Sanitation to ensure New York City becomes sustainable in all areas of its waste management.