

Malibu passes plastic bag ban

By Jonathan Friedman, The Malibu Times

Wednesday, May 14, 2008 2:32 PM PDT

Following presentations by local students and representatives from environmental groups, the Malibu City Council on Monday unanimously approved a ban on plastic bags in Malibu. The passage of the prohibition was expected since all the council members had publicly endorsed it prior to the meeting.

"The action by the City Council sends a clear message that the city is serious about its quest to clean, preserve and protect our ocean and marine life," said Mayor Pamela Conley Ulich in a statement released on Tuesday.

The ban applies to all kinds of non-reusable plastic bags. City staff had only proposed a ban on non-decomposable plastic bags, with an option for the council to outlaw decomposable ones as well.

However, the council decided to go with the latter option. The law applies to all businesses within the city and city properties. It does not ban single-use, plastic produce bags.

The ordinance goes into effect in six months for grocery stores, food vendors, restaurants, pharmacies and city facilities.

After one year, all other retailers and vendors must comply.

Although other cities have banned plastic bags, most of them have only done it for grocery stores and pharmacies.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in January voted to reduce plastic bag usage by enacting voluntary reductions of 30 percent by 2010 and 65 percent by 2013.

Mayor Conley Ulich also wanted the city to look into creating a tax on paper bags, as suggested by the environmental group Heal the Bay. But to do that, a study would need to be conducted on the feasibility of a fee and what it would be.

Conley Ulich wanted city staff to begin the process for conducting such a study, but her council colleagues said they were concerned about whether the staff had time to do that now, a concern shared by City Manager Jim Thorsen.

"We have so many things on our plate ... certainly adding more items on the agenda may impact our storm water program [Legacy Park project]," Thorsen said.

Conley Ulich then countered that she believed the bag ban was part of the greater picture of storm water management.

At its quarterly review meeting earlier this month, the council established a set of priorities for city staff. Mayor Pro Tem Andy Stern and Councilmember Sharon Barovsky asked Thorsen to

come back to the council at a later meeting with information about how the staff can fit the paper bag issue onto their list.

Santa Monica's city staff is currently working on an ordinance proposal of its own for a plastic bag ban and a possible tax on paper bags to go before that City Council this summer. Thorsen said Malibu might be able to use Santa Monica's information, if it is completed, to relieve some of the work this city staff would have to do.

Heal the Bay Executive Director Mark Gold said at Monday's meeting he did not want the plastic bag ordinance to lead to an increase in paper bag usage because it would be "moving the problem from one waste stream to another," but he acknowledged that doing something about paper bags would take some work.

"This global marine crisis [with plastic bags] is what you're dealing with right now," Gold said.

According to the city staff report drafted by Malibu Environmental Programs Coordinator Jennifer Voccola for Monday's meeting, plastic bags are carried by the wind and pollute the local watershed and storm drain system in addition to causing other non-marine pollution.

Voccola and others at the meeting said the most ideal situation would be for people to use reusable bags when shopping.

The council also heard from students of Malibu High School's Environmental Club and the Malibu Boys and Girls Club's "Green Teens" group. The students relayed various alarming pieces of information about the problems with plastic bags and other forms of plastic, and encouraged the council to approve the plastic bag ban.

The Green Teens are selling \$10 reusable bags that state "Green is the new black and plastic is so last year." The bags are going to be sold in front of the local grocery stores and be available at the club's Web site, www.malibuyouth.org. The money raised will go toward more programs for the Green Teens.