Public Works Perspective: Why should public agencies limit single use plastic bags?

Department of Public Works
December 15, 2010
Background

- Plastic carryout bags were first introduced around 1975
- 80% of all grocery stores in the U.S. currently use plastic bags
- 19 billion plastic bags are consumed in California each year
  - 6 billion plastic bags in LA County
    - 45,000 tons of plastic bags are landfilled annually (0.4% of the disposal waste stream)
    - 117,000 tons of paper bags are landfilled in LA County annually (1% of the disposal waste stream, due to greater weight/bag)
Why Are Plastic Bags Problematic?

- Plastic Carryout Bags
  - 0.4% of the waste stream
  - Up to **25%** of the litter stream

- Materials are lightweight, easily windblown, and last indefinitely - resulting in a *disproportionate impact* on the environment and public infrastructure
Economic Impacts of Plastic Bag Litter

- According to the State of CA, public agencies in CA spend over $375 million for litter prevention, cleanup, and disposal.
- The L.A. County Flood Control District spends more than $24 million on litter prevention, cleanup, and enforcement efforts.
- Caltrans District 7, which covers LA and Ventura Counties, collected 50,000 CY of litter and debris at a cost of $12 million/yr.
San Francisco Study

- San Francisco supermarket passed out 50 million bags a year - 90% plastic and 10% paper
  - Removal of bags from the recycling and compost streams, clearing machinery jams, and contamination of recycled and composted material results in $1.09 million in added cost or lost sales - 2.2 cents per bag
  - Collection and disposal. Collecting and disposing of bags costs $3.6 million annually - 7.2 cents per bag
  - Removing bags from city streets costs $2.6 million a year - 5.2 cents per bag
  - Potential remediation and processing costs of bags in city landfills is $1.2 million annually - 2.4 cents per bag

- TOTAL COST: 17 cents per bag
LA County Efforts

- April 2007 - Board of Supervisors instruction
  - Investigate the issue of polyethylene plastic and paper sack consumption in the County, including the pros and cons of adopting a policy similar to that of San Francisco

- August 2007 – “An Overview of Carryout Bags in Los Angeles County”
  - Manufacture, distribution, and use of plastic carryout bags in Los Angeles County
  - Fiscal, environmental, and public health impacts created by the consumption of plastic bags
  - Alternatives to plastic bag consumption
LA County Efforts

- Established Stakeholder Working Group:
  - Including representatives of supermarkets, retailers, environmental groups, the plastic bag industry, the public, and local government
  - Investigate measures to reduce the consumption of plastic and paper carryout bags at retail establishments throughout the County

- January 22, 2008 – Board of Supervisors adopted Alternative 5
  Voluntary Single Use Bag Reduction and Recycling Program, educated businesses and shoppers alike about ways to reduce the impacts of litter from single use bags on the environment; encourage shoppers to utilize reusable bags; and enhance the recycling of single use plastic bags and paper bags.
LA County Efforts

- July 1, 2008 – Launch of Single Use Bag Reduction and Recycling Program
  - Included Board-established benchmarks for rate of plastic bag disposal reduction:
    - 30% by July 1, 2010
    - 65% by July 1, 2013

- Brag About Your Bag® Reusable Bag Giveaway and Plastic Bag Recycling Campaign
  - November 15, 2009 to December 17, 2009
    - Approximately 60,000 reusable bags distributed
    - Approximately 45,000 plastic bags collected for recycling

- July 17, 2008 - Legal Challenge
LA County Efforts

- Single Use Bag Reduction and Recycling Program was not successful in meeting goals:
  - Over a 2-year period and despite State law requirements under AB 2449, stores did not provide data that would enable staff to determine if the first voluntary Program benchmark of 30% was met
  - No more than 8 stores at any given time had met the minimum participation levels
- 2008 Board action included instructions to draft an Ordinance banning plastic carryout bags and complete any review required by CEQA
LA County Efforts

- County also sponsored and/or supported legislation to establish a fee or ban single use plastic carryout bags, beginning with Assembly Bill 2829 (2008, Davis) up to the most recent legislation - Assembly Bill 1998 (2010, Julia Brownley)
- These legislative efforts were supported by a diverse coalition:
  - Local governments
  - Environmental organizations
  - Grocers
  - Industry
  - L.A. County Integrated Waste Management Task Force
  - LA County Board of Supervisors
  - 145 other organizations including stores, labor unions, and government officials
Economic Impacts of Plastic Bag Ordinance

- County conducted an independent study of the potential socio-economic impacts of the Ordinance
  - Major finding: average expected cost to residents is $5.72 per year

- Likely a positive impact for stores:
  - Reduced transportation and warehousing costs
  - No longer need to provide “free” bags
  - Cost savings can be passed on to consumers
Economic Impacts of Plastic Bag Ordinance

Additional Key Findings:

- The inclusion of the 10 cent fee on paper bags is expected to have a measurable impact on consumer behavior and encourage most customers to use reusable bags or to avoid using any bags.

- As a result, the impact of the proposed ordinance on lower-income residents of the County is expected to be negligible, since most of these customers will avoid the 10 cent charge by bringing their own bag or avoiding a bag.
Findings

- Reducing bag litter can result in significant cost savings to taxpayers
  - The RWQCB imposed a zero trash TMDL
    - Ballona Creek watershed
    - LA River watershed
  - O & M costs to the County and other agencies is expected to substantially increase in coming years
    - The RWQCB has recognized that ordinances restricting single use plastic bags can help achieve these goals.
Findings

- Accelerating the use of reusable bags has multiple opportunities to add value:
  - Reducing litter
    - Improve recreational experiences and quality of life
    - Reduce negative impacts on wildlife
    - Improve tourism
  - Reducing hidden costs to consumers
    - Up to $18/yr for plastic bags vs. $4/yr for reusable bags
  - Encouraging green jobs manufacturing reusable bags
Findings

- Conserve energy and natural resources
  - Generates less waste
  - Consumes fewer natural resources
  - Generates less air/water pollution from:
    - Manufacturing
    - Transportation
    - Recycling/disposal processes

- Invite citizens to actively participate in practices that promote a clean and sustainable environment
Conclusions

- Ban provides a **net benefit** economically and environmentally, saving taxpayer funds.
- Fee on paper bags provides **choice to customer**, results in negligible impact to most customers while mitigating potential for increased environmental impacts from single use paper bags.
- **Regional consistency** is vital to enhancing effectiveness and minimizing confusion among residents.
  - *We encourage you to become a participant in this effort, through [AboutTheBag.com](http://AboutTheBag.com)*