

HMB bans plastic bags, rules to take effect in April

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Be sure to have your reusable totes handy because Half Moon Bay is banning most disposable bags at local stores.

Following the lead of other Bay Area cities, Half Moon Bay became the latest town on Tuesday night to ban plastic bags at most local stores. The new rules will officially take effect on April 22, but San Mateo County health officials say they won't begin enforcing it until October.

The City Council passed the new ordinance unanimously.

Just because plastic is no longer an option, county officials hope that consumers won't just switch to paper. Merchants can still pack purchases in paper bags, but only if they are made with recycled materials.

Along with banning plastic bags, the proposed rules would tack on a 10-cent surcharge on paper and reusable bags, starting on April 22. That fee would increase to 25 cents in 2015. Retailers get to keep the extra money charged for the bags.

The ordinance language comes to Half Moon Bay and 23 other cities as part of an environmental review performed by San Mateo County officials. Currently, more than 386 million plastic bags are used each year on the Peninsula, said Waymond Wong, a program supervisor with the county environmental health department. A small fraction of those bags are recycled, he said, but many end up as garbage at landfills or as litter.

"These bags aren't necessarily free, it's embedded in all the costs at stores, and there's an environmental costs associated with this as well," he said.

San Jose passed a similar plastic bag ban last year, and city officials soon found that about 65 percent of shoppers made the switch to reusable bags. In the following months, the city officials found 75 percent fewer bags littering local creeks and rivers.

County health officials have already started distributing pamphlets and other materials to local business to help explain the new rules.

Retail shops stuck with a massive inventory of plastic bags can donate their excess stock for uses that are exempt under the new rules. For example, nonprofit organizations, such as charity thrift stores, would still be still allowed to use plastic bags and could provide a tax write-off for bag donations. Certain items would also be exempt under the new rules, such as meats, drug

prescriptions, garment bags and greeting cards. Restaurants would also still be allowed to use plastic bags for to-go orders.