

Santa Clara County panel proposes banning plastic bags

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In a surprising reversal of a decision made less than two months ago, a Santa Clara County commission is recommending an all-out ban on plastic shopping bags and a fee on paper bags.

The Recycling and Waste Reduction Commission, made up of elected leaders from around the county, plans to ask county supervisors and all 15 cities to adopt the proposal for grocers and other retailers, with an exemption for nonprofit "reuse" stores such as Goodwill.

The policy, if enacted, would appear to be among the toughest in the country. While San Francisco banned plastic bags in 2007, inspiring a wave of cities nationwide to consider following suit, recyclable paper bags are still free in grocery stores there.

"My feeling was if we did not recommend an approach that would have a meaningful impact, then we had not taken our role as environmental stewards seriously," said Jamie McLeod, a Santa Clara City Council member and chair of the commission. She said bags and other plastics account for 60 percent of the waste in county landfills.

Shoppers and store owners gave the proposal mixed reviews Friday. Tim Shestek, a Sacramento lobbyist for the American Chemistry Council, an industry trade association, warned that consumers lose out when bans are imposed.

Santa Clara County's commission will ask for the ban and fees to be in place by next April 22, the 40th anniversary of Earth Day.

Yet it was only in February that commissioners voted for a softer approach — one more aligned with what the plastics industry has been pushing. After more than a year of study, commissioners rejected a 25-cent fee on plastic bags, opting instead to encourage recycling.

But McLeod said the commission has since determined that strategy did not go far enough. According to California's Integrated Waste Management Board, Californians use 19 billion plastic bags a year, and environmentalists estimate that 1 million land in San Francisco Bay each year — a number plastics industry officials dispute.

Paper bags, meanwhile, consume millions of trees, environmentalists and plastics officials agree. As an alternative, a growing number of cities are pushing for reusable cloth bags.

At PW Market on Oakland Road in San Jose, the consensus Friday was split over the recommended ban.

"I don't like the idea," said Cindy Alam, 47, of San Jose. "But if I have to, I'll bring my own cloth bag because it will bother me to have to pay 25 cents for a paper bag."

Others embraced the notion.

"There is no excuse not to reuse your paper bag," said Kathy Sjoblom, 66, of San Jose, who keeps a stash in her car. "We already have enough crap in our landfill."

Victor Garcia, supervisor at Chavez Supermarket on McKee Road, said it may take customers a while to become accustomed to bringing in their own bags, but he believes they will come around.

"People like plastic bags, but they throw them away," Garcia said. "We've been trying to get people to use reusable bags, we sell them for 99 cents, but only a few people use them. So this week we're giving them away for free."

McLeod said commissioners responded at their Wednesday night meeting to an outpouring of residents "who pushed us to take action now and not wait, because the problem is only going to get worse."

The commission is an advisory body, but county supervisors generally follow its recommendations. Individual cities are expected to take the lead from the countywide authority while tailoring recommendations to their specific communities.

But trouble could loom for any city that follows the commission's advice.

Plastic bag manufacturers have filed or threatened lawsuits in a nationwide battle against restricting plastics. Palo Alto, the only city in Santa Clara County that has already banned single-use plastic

bags, was sued this week by bag manufacturers who say the city failed to adequately study the environmental impacts of the March ordinance.

Such lawsuits might make cities wary of passing bans, since environmental studies can be pricey; Oakland's, which also was challenged in court by the plastics industry, cost \$100,000. As a counterattack, the state's Ocean Protection Council on Thursday voted to fund a model environmental review that cities could use.

But lawsuits are not the only strategy industry interests are employing. After this week's county commission vote, representatives of the chemistry council emphasized they will now fight city by city for their alternative: encouraging the public to recycle bags.

Council spokesman Shestek noted the common reuse of plastic bags to line trash cans or pick up after dogs.

But Trish Mulvey, co-founder of the environmental coalition Clean South Bay, called the ban proposal "very responsive" to the comments commissioners received from residents.

"For me," Mulvey said, "it's about a culture shift beyond disposable everything."

Mercury News Staff Writer Sandra Gonzales contributed to this report.

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