

County supervisors consider banning plastic and paper bags

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Mercury News

Article Launched: 09/09/2008 07:58:27 AM PDT

The convenience of plastic and paper bags — and the harmful waste they generate — may soon become a thing of the past in Santa Clara County, as a growing number of local governments weigh bans and fees that could take effect as soon as next year.

Clogged waterways, suffocated shorebirds and over-stuffed landfills are among the motivators driving a growing number of elected officials to call for changes in long-standing shopping habits.

County supervisors take up the issue today, joining similar discussions in all 15 cities in the region. Supervisor Ken Yeager is asking county staff to study possible restrictions on single-use bags handed out with purchases in unincorporated areas. But any county action, he hopes, will also fuel consistency across city boundaries so that bringing a cloth bag to the store will become routine practice from Palo Alto to Gilroy.

Yeager is an avid runner along South Bay river banks, leading to constant reminders of the need for a bag ban.

Almost every day I see plastic bags caught in bushes and trees which really detract from the beauty of the river and has a toll on the wildlife," he said. "There are other ways that we can package our purchases that are not hurting the environment."

Californians toss an estimated 19 billion plastic bags into the trash or onto the landscape each year. A recent Santa Clara County survey found that plastic bags make up approximately 60 percent of all the region's litter.

Efforts to reduce the trash can be found worldwide, from a ground-breaking law to ban plastic bags in San Francisco in 2007 to fees imposed in Ireland.

Yeager wants supervisors to consider a ban on plastic and possibly also paper bags, which destroy trees and fill garbage heaps. He hopes to have a policy in place by year's end, when other local agencies are expected to take similar action.

By law, grocery stores must have a visible, plastic bag recycling bin and offer reusable bags for sale. But new laws now being considered at the state and local level would go further.

The California Grocers Association, representing owners of 6,000 grocery stores, opposes "any type of mandate or ban on certain types of bags, and in general, we oppose fees," said spokesman Dave Heylen. If laws must be passed, the association prefers that they apply to paper and plastic — not just plastic — and that if retailers are asked to comply that all stores be included, not just grocery stores.

Elizabeth Constantino, manager of the county's integrated waste division, said the bring-your-own culture change will not come easily.

"It's a whole huge paradigm shift," she said. "Even those of us in this office who are incredibly environmentally minded will say, 'Oh shoot, I forgot my bag.' It's taking a while to get used to it."

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