



Plastic bag era comes to an end in Palo Alto

City's ban on plastic bags at retail locations kicks in today; restaurants have until Nov. 1

For Palo Alto shoppers, the question "Paper or plastic?" officially becomes an anachronism Monday, as the city's new ban on plastic bags takes effect at all retail locations and paper bags become a costlier commodity.

More than three years after the city's ban on checkout plastic bags took effect at local supermarkets, the ban is spreading to all retail location thanks to a decision the City Council made in March. The new ordinance also means that retailers will now have to charge customers at least 10 cents for paper bags.

The law also bans plastic bags from local restaurants, though that provision isn't kicking in until Nov. 1. Unlike other businesses, food establishments will have the option of providing paper bags free of charge. They will also be allowed to use plastic bags for soups and other liquid products.

The goal of the new ordinance is to reduce litter in local creeks and the Bay, according to Public Works staff. Officials point to a recent study from Scripps Institution of Oceanography, which reported that plastic debris in the Pacific Ocean grew a hundredfold over the past 40 years.

Plastic accounts for 60 percent of the litter in local creeks, according to Public Works.

"Last year we found about 350 bags during two local creek clean-up events and a separate one-month tally of bags found in the lower watershed. In addition, local photographers have also provided staff with photos of birds impacted at the Baylands. So we're trying to address this global problem at a local level," Julie Weiss, the city's project manager for the ordinance, said in a statement.

Assistant Public Works Director Phil Bobel called the expanded ordinance "the next step in eliminating plastic bags in our creeks and San Francisco Bay." The ordinance is expected to eliminate 20 million single-use plastic and paper bags annually.

The city recommends that customers remember to bring their own bags by putting reusable bags near their doors or in their cars and keeping foldable bags in their pockets, backpacks and purses.