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OPINION

Bag the Plastic

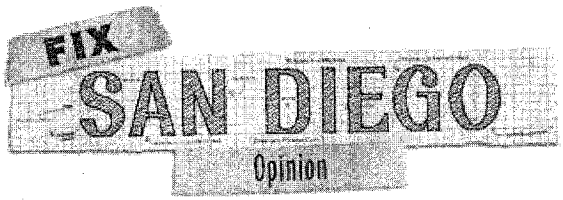
BY: SHERRI LIGHTNER | OCTOBER 24, 2013 | 26 COMMENTS

Photo by Sam Hodgson

Plastic bags like this one line Chollas Parkway in Oak Park. The City Council is considering a measure that would stop supermarkets from handing out the bags. Photo: Sam Hodgson

Paper or plastic?

That decades-old question at the grocery checkout counter is often answered these days with a "Neither. I brought my own."



(http://voiceofsandiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/fix-san-diego-opinion.jpg)That's a good sign, but it still represents just a fraction of San Diego shoppers. Most people still rely on retailers to provide the ubiquitous and cheap plastic bags that are so numerous, they are polluting our beaches, littering our streets and landfill, killing marine mammals and wildlife and burdening taxpayers and local governments.

The proliferation of these bags has driven lawmakers — including those in San Diego — to propose ways to reduce plastic and encourage reusable bags.

Earlier this week, the City Council's Rules and Economic Development Committee unanimously voted to move forward with a citywide ordinance to reduce single-use plastic shopping bags at grocery stores and other retail outlets, and require that paper and reusable bags are available for sale.

Plastic bag restrictions, combined with nominal fees for paper bags, are potent tools for reducing plastic trash. Across the state, and around the nation, this type of simple,

effective plastic-bag control has been shown to bolster the economy and promote environmental progress.

After years of discussion and delays, now is the time for San Diego to stop simply hoping that people will recycle and reuse, and finally take a stronger leadership role on limiting single-use plastic bags and reducing pollution.

When the city of San Diego held off five years ago on banning plastic bags, it missed a chance to be at the forefront of environmentally responsible lawmaking in California.

By the time the Council committee took up the issue again this fall, more than 80 cities and municipalities in the state had prohibited stores from providing shoppers with plastic bags.

More importantly, during those lost years millions of plastic bags – possibly over a billion – have been distributed in San Diego. With a recycling rate of only 3 percent, those plastic bags have become a costly economic and environmental menace that we can easily do without.

If there has been an upside to the city's delay, it's that recent discussions with key stakeholders have produced a more flexible, common-sense ordinance that is supported by business, consumer and environmental

groups alike, including the California Grocers Association, Surfrider Foundation and Coastkeeper San Diego to name a few.

The city's Environmental Services Department, along with the nonprofit Equinox Center, studied best practices from around the state and country to craft an ordinance that will be phased in over several years, and done in a way that won't burden our local businesses or our most vulnerable residents.

Under the proposed ordinance, which will undergo an environmental review before final approval by the full Council sometime next year, plastic bags can still be used for meat, produce and prescription medications, as well as by restaurants and dry cleaners. Also, the bag restrictions will not apply to nonprofit stores, large non-food retailers or customers who participate in government food-assistance programs.

A report presented to city leaders this week by the Equinox Center concludes the proposed ordinance will reduce the number of bags used in San Diego by 70 percent. That means of the approximate 500 million bags distributed here annually, about 350 million fewer plastic bags will be used and litter kept out of our parks, canyons, landfills and bays.

Further, the report found that neither retailers nor consumers suffered significant economic damage in the cities and municipalities where bans currently are in effect.

Opponents try to stop plastic bag bans on the grounds that they put the cost on the consumer. But we're already paying for plastic bags through local taxes to combat litter and clean up trash-clogged waterways, as well as through hidden bag costs added to food and retail prices.

The California Grocers Association supports San Diego's plastic bag reduction ordinance because it's the right thing to do for our environment, and reduces costs they otherwise have to pass on. According to the association, stores located in cities that charge bag fees report 90 percent of customers bring their own, a clear win for the environment.

In fact, in addition to reducing the environmental impacts, the plastic bag reduction ordinance will drive demand for reusable bags, and in turn, potentially create new green jobs and increase sales tax revenues for local tax coffers.

The city also can save approximately $160,000 each year in landfill clean-up costs, not including costs for plastic bag litter removal from streets, storm drains, parks and beaches.

With adoption and implementation of a plastic bag ordinance, San Diego is poised to become one of the largest U.S. cities (along with Los Angeles, San Francisco, Long Beach and Seattle) to take such a positive step toward bettering the environment and saving taxpayers money.

With the exemptions that are a part of this ordinance, along with targeted education and outreach to promote reusable bags, we can ensure we do this in a manner that best enables all of our citizens (including those in underserved communities) to do the right thing for our neighborhoods, local economy and the environment.

It will take San Diego shoppers a while to adopt the habit of carrying reusable totes for their groceries and other purchases. With this new ordinance, they'll have the option of purchasing a less environmentally damaging alternative for the times they forget.

Cities and even whole nations around the world are doing just fine without the polluting single-use plastic shopping bags, and so can San Diego.

Sherri Lightner is chair of the City Council's Rules and Economic Development Committee, and council member for District 1. Lightner's commentary has been edited for clarity. See anything in there we should fact check? Tell us what to check out here