

Long Beach Council Votes To Ban Use Of Plastic Bags

Aims Is To Reduce Community Pollution, Harm To Marine Life



The Long Beach City Council approved an ordinance banning plastic carryout bags that, when not properly recycled, end up in landfills, city stormdrains or are caught by the wind and carried to the ocean. The type of bag banned is made of a lightweight plastic less than 2.25 milliliters thick with handles, pictured here. (Long Beach Business Journal photograph by Carlos Delgado)

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A controversial new city ordinance regarding the use of plastic bags may have a positive impact on reducing pollution in city storm drains, on the beach and in the ocean. At least that's the hope of its supporters.

The ordinance regulates the distribution of plastic carryout bags and paper bags – specifically those provided by grocers and other food markets citywide – and promotes the use of reusable bags. The ban was approved on a 5-3 vote at the May 24 Long Beach City Council meeting, with Councilmember Dee Andrews not on the floor at the time of the vote. Mayor Foster signed the ordinance June 3, with part of it taking effect in about 60 days and the remainder the first of next year.

The type of bag banned is made of a lightweight plastic less than 2.25 milliliters thick, with handles that can easily be caught by the wind, fly into the air and travel to the ocean.

Millions of plastic bags are thrown away each year and end up in landfills or blow into the ocean where they eventually become a part of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – a gyre of marine litter in the central North Pacific Ocean that is roughly the size of Texas. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this pollution kills one million seabirds and an estimated 100,000 sea turtles and marine life each year. The garbage patch, known as Earth's largest dump, is significantly polluted with plastics, including plastic bags.

Several environmental organizations estimate that plastic bags may take up to 1,000

years to break down. Various countries, states, counties and cities across the globe are either considering or adopting plastic bag bans. Most recently, China has cracked down on plastic bags, announcing a prohibition of ultra-thin bag production (less than 0.025 millimeters thick) that started June 1, according to environmental think tank Worldwatch Institute. Other countries noted by Worldwatch that have bans, taxes and other government policies regulating or eliminating plastic bags include Bangladesh, Ireland, Kenya and Taiwan.

The Long Beach ban prevents 315 identified grocery stores, supermarkets, convenience stores, food marts, pharmacies, drug stores and farmers' markets in Long Beach from distributing plastic carryout bags. Grocers and supermarkets that gross more than \$2 million in sales annually and have at least 10,000 square feet of retail



Merchants belonging to the 4th Street Business Association began distributing the reusable bags, seen above, in fall 2010. According to Kathleen Schaaf, owner of Meow and a member of the association, many of the business owners were seeing a trend in customers refusing bags or bringing in their own recycled bags. Other business associations and city departments have also organized reusable bag campaigns, and, in light of the recently approved ban on plastic bags, city officials are working on ways to possibly provide reusable bags to citizens in the future, according to Broc Coward, chief of staff for Vice Mayor Suja Lowenthal. (Photograph courtesy of 4th Street Business Association)

space must comply with the ordinance by August 1, 2011. All other applicable stores must comply by January 1, 2012.

According to background information provided to councilmembers, 10,000 plastic bags are used daily at each of the 218 stores under 10,000 square feet, and 5,000 bags are used daily at each of the 97 stores larger than 10,000 square feet. The total number of plastic bags used citywide per day is 2,060,000. The nonprofit Clean Air Council has claimed that less than one percent of plastic bags in the U.S. are recycled each year.

“These plastic bags have a horrible impact on marine life and I’m proud to live in a city that is willing to take these first steps,” said Seamus Innes of the environmental nonprofit Surfrider Foundation’s Long Beach Chapter. The chapter worked with local residents and other groups such as Heal The Bay and Earth Resource Foundation campaigning for the citywide ban.

Long Beach spends approximately \$2.2 million annually on maintenance costs associated with marine debris and plastic bag pollution, according to the 2nd City Council District Web site, which includes this statement: “In addition, the city has spent more than \$18 million on capital

projects designed to catch litter and debris before they are discharged to our rivers and beaches. These investments in our infrastructure have proven necessary, not just to reduce marine debris, but to allow Long Beach to lead by example in the campaign to urge upstream cities to be responsible for their own waste pollution.”

In an effort to continue to “lead by example,” Vice Mayor Suja Lowenthal, who represents the 2nd District, along with Councilmembers Robert Garcia and Gary DeLong, brought a request to the city council last December 7 to have the city attorney’s office and city manager draft an addendum to Los Angeles County’s final environmental impact report (EIR) called “Proposed Ordinances to Ban Plastic Bags in Los Angeles County.” From the L.A. County EIR, the board of supervisors adopted an ordinance banning plastic bags in unincorporated areas, in which about 1.1 million people live.

The county EIR is available for any city in the county to use as part of individual implementation plans, and Long Beach did just that, spending \$9,000 on an addendum to the EIR for its ordinance. The city’s ordinance is based on that which L.A. County adopted and legisla-

tion introduced in 2010 for a statewide plastic bag ban. Council voted to support the bill, AB 1998, in June 2010. AB 1998, sponsored by Assemblymember Julia Brownley of Santa Monica – where all plastic bags are banned – failed in the California Senate in August 2010.

Living Without Plastic Bags

To replace the banned plastic bags, affected businesses have the option of charging consumers 10 cents each for paper bags, which are made from a minimum of 40 percent post-consumer recycled content. The funds collected from paper bag sales is strictly to be used for costs associated with the ban, as well as for materials to educate the public on the ban and encourage the use of reusable bags.

Stores may sell reusable bags, and many already do. The ordinance requires that reusable bags sold must: have a minimum of 125 uses; carry a minimum of 22 pounds; have a minimum volume of 15 liters; and be machine washable or made with material that may be disinfected and does not contain lead, cadmium or any other toxic heavy metal. If a plastic bag is at least 2.25 millimeters thick, and meets the performance requirements for reusable bags, then it is considered reusable and is

not banned by this ordinance, according to Deputy City Attorney Amy Burton, who drafted the ordinance. Thus, stores affected by the ban may opt to switch to the thicker plastic bags.

The L.A. County ordinance is effective July 1, 2011 – one month before the Long Beach ordinance goes into effect. “One of the advantages that we’ll have is the benefit of their experience to sort out technical issues of which bags meet the definition and which bags will work,” Burton said. According to the Long Beach ordinance, customers who are participating in the California Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children or the Supplemental Food Program are exempt.

In the coming weeks, city staff from the environmental services bureau (ESB), the health department, public works and other relevant departments are to discuss with City Manager Pat West the next steps in a citywide outreach and educational campaign, according to Lowenthal. The ordinance requires the development of a public education campaign – a Web site and hotline – for affected businesses to receive information about the ordinance and for Long Beach residents to learn about the benefits of the ban for the coastal community.

“I think many of us started off using tote bags for our groceries before reusable bags became so prevalent, so I encourage residents to reuse whatever they already have, including paper and plastic bags,” Lowenthal said. “Why buy a paper bag for ten cents when you have bags at home?”

This sentiment is shared by local business owners, many of whom already provide alternatives to plastic bags. The On Broadway Business Association and 4th Street Business Association developed marketing campaigns around reusable bags by printing merchants’ logos on reusable bags and then selling them to customers. Kathleen Schaaf, owner of Meow on 4th Street’s Retro Row, said business owners in her neighborhood were already seeing a trend in customers either bringing their own bags or declining bags altogether.

“That’s the direction that we’re going in and we need to be more mindful when we’re out there in our community. I think recyclable bags are definitely the way you have to go. It’s not like you have much of a choice anymore. They’ve had them in other countries for years,” Schaaf said. “It’s just educating the consumer, but I think a lot of our 4th street customers, being that they are recyclers, are mindful. It’s not a new trend; we’re going back to the old days.” The campaign on Retro Row began in fall

2010, and all merchants belonging to the 4th Street Business Association sell their reusable bags in stores for about \$2 each.

Community Concerns And Talk Of Referendum

Though the ordinance was approved unanimously after the first reading on May 17, three councilmembers dissented in the vote after the second and final reading of the plastic carryout bag ban. Those dissenters were Councilmembers Patrick O’Donnell, Rae Gabelich and Gerrie Schipske.

Gabelich told the council at the May 24 meeting that it is a misnomer to call the bags in the ordinance “single use bags” because “we use them many times over.” Some examples she brought up include using such bags to pick up dog scat, to line small trashcans, to create a receptacle in the car and to carry wet clothes from the beach or pool. Gabelich noted that people would have to purchase these bags otherwise.

Schipske made a similar argument and suggested the continuation of the recycling program paired with a plastic bag rebate program where consumers could bring their plastic bags back to the grocery store for a refund “since you’re paying for it,” she said. Schipske held a community meeting on the ordinance, where she told the council that a representative from the grocer’s association frankly admitted that the cost of the carryout bags is incorporated into the cost of the products offered by the store.

In addition, Schipske noted a high volume of calls and e-mails from constituents with concerns about the ordinance, and asked about the possibility of a referendum if residents want to overturn it. “Something this impactful should have been put to a vote of the voters,” Schipske said at the meeting.

According to Burton, signatures need to be gathered for a referendum. “You need to have about 20,000 signatures within 30 days of the legislative action,” she said. “How likely that is, it sort of seems to require some organized effort.”

Councilmember James Johnson said at the meeting that the city’s only option to reduce plastic bag consumption locally in the immediate future is to impose a ban, since state regulations do not allow counties or municipalities to charge a fee or tax for using plastic bags.

Gabelich, O’Donnell and Schipske all affirmed to the council their desire to have a plastic bag ban as statewide regulation.

“Without it happening at the state level, this is over-burdening the citizens of Long Beach on a public policy issue,” Schipske said.

Lowenthal agrees the state should ban plastic bags, and told the Business Journal via e-mail that she and the council would be in support of future state legislation banning the bags. “We’ve been on record as supporting statewide bans for years and we’ll continue to support such legislation,” Lowenthal said. “Our local ordinance is based on the county’s ordinance, which borrows greatly from the most recent state legislation on plastic bags.”

Plastic Bag Bans Across The Globe

Following is a partial list of California cities, and counties, other states and countries that have either adopted or are considering a ban on plastic bags (information taken from Vice Mayor Lowenthal’s Web site):

Cities – Berkeley, Calabasas, Culver City, Malibu, Manhattan Beach, Fresno, Glendale, Oakland, Pasadena, Richmond, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, Sierra Madre and West Hollywood. **Counties** – Marin, Los Angeles and Santa Clara. **States** – New York, New Jersey and Maryland. **Countries** – Australia, China, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Ireland, Mumbai, India, Kenya, Norway, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, Tanzania, Uganda and United Kingdom. ■