

A bag-ban experiment

Daily Breeze editorial

Article Launched: 07/10/2008 07:07:32 PM PDT



When it comes to public policy, our rule of thumb has been to favor the power of incentives and volunteerism over top-down regulations. So when Manhattan Beach this month opted to ban plastic carry-out bags in the city, we were somewhat skeptical.

After all, many people are acclimated to using the lightweight and sturdy bags. And Manhattan is now the only city in the region with a policy of banning point-of-sale plastic bags at grocery stores, restaurants, pharmacies, city offices and eventually other retailers.

On the other hand, the effects of plastics pollution on the environment have fueled much interest in this issue, and cities such as Malibu and San Francisco are on board with their own bag-banning ordinances. Having Manhattan as a sort of public-

policy guinea pig should help other South Bay cities decide whether to follow suit.

Whether one favors the bag ban or not, Manhattan leaders have put a lot of thought into their ordinance and have strong public support behind them. Accounts of the City Council's vote to ban plastic bags reveal vocal community support for the idea, and it comes not just from environmental activists. The city reports that a Chamber of Commerce membership survey resulted in 86 responses, 70 of which were in favor of a plastic bag ban.

In addition, council members were unanimous in their support for it.

There are many reasons to steer public policy in the direction of reducing plastic bags.

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For one thing, due to technical and other reasons, the recycling rate for them is dismal, about 5 percent. Such lightweight plastics tend to clog storm drains and add to beach pollution. And when the bags end up in the oceans, their effect on marine mammals is particularly disturbing. The National Marine Mammal Laboratory concluded as early as the 1970s that incidences of "plastic entanglement" were killing 40,000 seals annually.

Already, it seems that other cities will follow Manhattan's lead. Gardena, for one, will be drafting a similar ordinance aimed at banning plastic bags.

It's likely that cities that ban the bags will also call on merchants to charge a fee for paper bags. This will encourage consumers to have a supply of reusable bags on hand when they go shopping. That scenario makes the most sense environmentally.

Most people will likely adapt quickly to the new paradigm. It's a small shift in behavior, and we suspect that a year or two from now people will wonder what all the fuss was about and why they didn't make the change sooner.