

No more plastic bags in Manhattan

by Danny Brown

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For cashiers in Manhattan Beach the familiar checkout question “paper or plastic?” is now obsolete. On Tuesday night all five City Councilmembers voted to make Manhattan Beach the first city in the South Bay to forbid businesses from using plastic bags, despite the threat of litigation from a coalition of plastic bag manufactures.

“Some lobbyists will talk about education efforts to reduce the use of plastic instead of a ban,” said Councilmember Nick Tell, who shared a similar opinion and enthusiasm with the other councilmembers about the measure. “But as a green city we sometimes need to guide our residents toward making the right choice, and the right choice is reusable. We have to say convenience isn’t the answer.”

The ban gives city grocery stores, food vendors, restaurants, pharmacies and city facilities six months to transition away from plastic, and all other establishments a year.

In place of plastic bags, council members are optimistic residents will carry reusable bags rather than asking for paper and mentioned considering a \$.25 fee for the latter to discourage an increase in use.

“But for right now the focus is on plastic bags, which are the number one source of litter you see in our community, and if we can cut into that by banning them, then I’m all for it,” Mayor Richard Montgomery said.

Under current California state law a city cannot place a user fee on plastic bags.

Local business owners, residents, children, surfers and representatives from the environmental activist groups Heal the Bay and Surfrider Foundation crowded into the council chamber to voice their support for the proposed ban.

However, Save the Plastic Bag Coalition opposed the city’s action and vowed to sue regarding the bag-banning ordinance.

“We object to this witch hunt against plastic bags,” said the coalition’s Northern California-based attorney Stephen Joseph.

He argued that the Manhattan Beach staff report supporting the ban is misleading and exaggerates the harmful effect plastic bags have on the environment:

“There’s plastic debris in the ocean, yes, but to say that plastic bags are the problem is not true. They site all this information about marine animals dying from eating plastic bags but the only thing backing it up are a handful of the same pictures of the same animals eating plastic bags repeated over and over. Plastic bags have been around for 30

years so where're all the other pictures? The *London Times* report exposed this as a myth and the city's report is intellectually dishonest.”

According to Joseph, Save the Plastic Bag Coalition formed last month in response to Manhattan Beach's initial June 3 city meeting to ban plastic bags. The group was founded by California-based companies Elkay Plastics and Command Packaging and consists of approximately eight plastic bag manufacturers and plastic bag distributors.

The coalition is not suing the city of Malibu, which last month became the first Southern California city to ban plastic bags, because the pro-bag consortium did not exist when the city passed its ordinance.

During the June meeting, Manhattan Beach councilmembers were chomping at the bit to pass the plastic bag ban but were stalled by an eleventh-hour letter from Save the Plastic Bag Coalition. The letter stated the city did not sufficiently study the negative environmental impacts a ban would have, as required under the California Environmental Quality Act, and threatened to sue unless the city revised its seven-page report.

On Tuesday the City Council had a 283-page report outlining both the community and environmental pros and cons of banning plastic bags.

According to the report, of the 6 billion plastic bags consumed in Los Angeles County each year, less than five percent are recycled, versus an estimated 21 percent of paper bags that are recycled. It also said that the extra cost of paper bags—which can be up to four times more than plastic—did not deter local businesses from supporting a plastic bag ban.

The Assistant to the City Manager Lindy Coe-Juell, who spearheaded the report, said a survey-response letter showed more than 80 percent of the city's Chamber of Commerce members are in favor of passing the ordinance and so is the local Ralphs.

“We've seen a lot of support in the community that this is a change they want to make,” Coe-Juell said.

In order to help businesses make the transition, Coe-Juell said Manhattan Beach is also planning an aggressive outreach and education campaign.

The report also examined a comparison of the Life Cycle Assessments for plastic versus paper bags to determine which was more environmentally harmful, but came to the conclusion that limited data and biased tests made it difficult to determine if one was better than the other.

What did sway the argument in favor of banning plastic, however, was a Los Angeles city study in 2004 that found plastic bags made up 25 percent of the litter cleaned from 30 storm-drain catch basins.

The president of Heal the Bay, Mark Gold, rebutted Joseph's argument that plastic bags do not kill a large number of marine life, pointing out that the bags break down in the ocean through photodegradation and wave and wind activity.

"The bags are all broken into smaller bits and mix together in a sort of soup," explained Sarah Abramson, the coastal resources director of Heal the Bay. "When we conduct an autopsy on an animal, it's difficult to figure out what plastic killed it, but going off of the statistics we have from the amount of high amount of plastic bags found during beach clean-ups and the large number that wind up in catch basins, it's fair to say a good percentage of the plastic debris marine life are consuming is from plastic bags."

Before making their closing statements, councilmembers addressed Joseph's argument that paper bags are more harmful than plastic bags by making it clear that, in the end, their ultimate goal was not to have people deciding between paper or plastic, but to bring reusable bags.

"We believe plastic bags are a good product that should not be phased out," said Joseph, the day after the meeting. "We will not apologize for this product and will fight to keep it available for people to chose." ER