



City of Brownsville prepares for plastic bag ban Wednesday

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Brownsville is welcoming the New Year in green.

A city ordinance goes into effect Wednesday requiring shoppers to bring their own reusable bags on trips to the store instead of using the thin plastic bags that up to now were available at the checkout counter.

The move, first passed by the city commission in December 2009, is a huge step for protecting the environment, city leaders say — one that puts Brownsville ahead of larger cities like Austin and San Antonio in efforts to keep the city clean.

“We are the first in the state of Texas to ban plastic bags, and nationally, we are No. 12 to ban plastic bags,” said Rose Timmer, director of Healthy Communities of Brownsville, which worked closely with the city of Brownsville to promote the ordinance. “But (this rule) is not so much about the numbers and where we stand in line. It is about the litter problems that Brownsville has.”

Brownsville’s resacas are so polluted, for example, that some emanate foul odors. And litter often clogs the city’s drainage system, Timmer said, remembering a recent cleanup event where volunteers pulled a shopping cart, a grill and “lots and lots of plastic bags” out of the drainage system of one of the resacas.

City Commissioner Edward Camarillo said the new ordinance would help combat all of these problems. It will also slow the buildup of trash at the Brownsville landfill, which services other cities in the area, allowing the site to function longer, Camarillo said.

But for the new ban to be successful, city leaders need businesses and residents to play their part, he said. He said he thinks they are ready to do that.

“We talked to the people, we made sure every step of the way that our stakeholders were involved,” Camarillo said when asked why Brownsville succeeded in passing the plastic bag ban when cities like Austin and Laredo have failed. “It took us a year. It was a long process. But this is just a great thing, a beautiful thing for the city, and in time everybody will see that.”

Now Austin is seeking Brownsville’s advice to create a similar ban.

The ordinance is not without its critics. In letters to The Brownsville Herald, some residents have expressed concern that the ban overburdens the community, especially residents who cannot afford to purchase reusable bags, and small businesses, which cannot provide more expensive paper bags for their customers.

“Nearly all retail stores use only plastic bags for customer purchases, because plastic is four times cheaper and much easier to store, work with and carry,” Robert Autrey wrote last February in a letter to

The Herald. "This ordinance will be difficult to comply with for large items being purchased, dry cleaners, and small stores."

Other opponents of the ban believed residents would be unfairly "taxed" if they forgot to bring their own reusable bags. Shoppers who find themselves without a bag at the store can either buy a reusable one from the store or pay a fee of \$1 to have their items packed in a plastic bag.

Camarillo said that concerns about taxation are misconceptions. Fee proceeds will go to city environmental programs, recycling efforts and city clean-up initiatives, he said.

The city decided to allow the fee so that businesses could get rid of plastic bags they have in stock and to encourage residents to bring their own bags, Camarillo explained. The goal is to phase out the fee.

"The plastic-bag option will only be available until the plastic bags run out," the city commissioner said.

Shops and retailers are helping residents comply with the ordinance by selling cheap reusable bags, city leaders said. Some are even giving them out.

At the stores, some customers said they were confused about the ban's start date. It had originally been slated for Jan. 1 but was moved because of the holiday.

Still, most seemed to welcome the ordinance.

Adelina Barrera, 37, said she had already bought her reusable bags.

"Plastic bags contaminate our city, our environment," she said as she was leaving an H-E-B grocery store. "This ban is a good idea."

Just a few feet away, Lorenzo Miranda, 58, was exiting with a bag of groceries. He, too, believed the ordinance to be a good thing.

"It will help us all in the end," he said.