

Coalition to promote reusable shopping bags

By ERIC LINDBERG — July 17, 2009

In a continuing effort to get local residents to bring reusable bags to the grocery store, a coalition of community groups and the city of Santa Barbara is launching a new awareness campaign under the moniker of “Where’s Your Bag?”

The strategy largely involves distributing signs to remind shoppers to bring their own bags while shopping — from placards in stores and parking lots to window decals for vehicles.

“Plastic bags are an easy thing to live without and it’s something everyone can get on board with,” said Kathi King, one of the leading coordinators of the awareness effort.

King started pushing for a ban on plastic bags and Styrofoam takeout containers several years ago, and ended up securing approval from the city to form a partnership aimed at educating the public about the ill effects of single-use bags.

With 19 billion plastic bags being used annually in California — and nearly a trillion worldwide — King said the petroleum-based sacks are not only an eyesore as litter, but have a serious impact on the environment.

“They really become unintentional litter so easily, because they are so light,” she said, adding that plastic bags have added tons of waste to a massive gyre of plastic floating in the Pacific Ocean.

Marine creatures often mistake the floating bags for food and end up choking, while small bits of broken-down plastic wind up in fish that are eaten by humans.

While plastic bags often garner criticism for their effects on the environment after being used, King noted that paper bags are even worse for the environment during the production stage. She is hopeful that government agencies will start moving toward a ban on all single-use bags.

“I think we need to outlaw paper bags as well, and get people to bring their own bags,” she said, adding later, “The more we can get people to do it voluntarily, the easier it will be to ease into legislation.”

The “Where’s Your Bag” campaign includes training workers at participating stores to encourage the use of reusable bags, in addition to handing out several thousand bags.

King said remembering to bring reusable bags to the store is simply a matter of making it a habit.

“Half the people we surveyed in a State Street survey last September said they want to bring their own bags, but they always forget,” she said.

She hopes the campaign will have many of the reminder signs up in parking lots and stores by the end of next month, when the campaign will officially launch with an event at De la Guerra Plaza.

On August 28 from 2 to 5 p.m., King and coordinators from other partner agencies — including Santa Barbara Channelkeeper, Tri-County Produce, the California Grocer’s Association and the city’s environmental services division — will set up informational tables in the plaza. The Banana Slug String Band will provide entertainment and local nonprofits will hold giveaways, officials said.

The following day, organizers plan to set up tables at community events and in front of participating stores to help spread the word about the campaign.