

Homer City Council votes to ban most plastic shopping bags

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Ordinance begins Jan.1; businesses allowed to use up their current inventory.

By MICHELLE THERIAULT BOOTS — Anchorage Daily News

Homer's city council passed an ordinance Monday banning plastic bags, making the Kachemak Bay town one of a handful of Alaska communities to do so.

The ordinance bars businesses from giving customers disposable plastic shopping bags less than 2.25 millimeters thick that are "not suitable for continuous reuse."

It passed by a 4-2 vote, said Beau Burgess, a Homer city council member who has backed the effort.

The rule basically applies to thin plastic grocery bags, the "cheap plastic bag stores hand out by the tens of thousands or tens of millions," said city councilman David Lewis, who supported the measure. It includes exceptions for things like bags meant to hold bulk nuts, grains or small hardware items or baked goods.

Homer doesn't have a visible plastic bag problem, Burgess said. But concern over marine and land pollution was a motivating factor for some who voted to pass the ban, he said.

"Homer draws its economic livelihood from tourism and fisheries," Burgess said. "And there are plenty of viable, good alternatives to plastic bags."

The ordinance will take effect Jan. 1, 2013, he said, but businesses are allowed to use up any pre-existing inventory of plastic bags before they have to comply.

It will likely have the most impact on grocery stores that regularly use the flimsy plastic bags, Burgess said.

Bob Malone, the manager of Homer's Safeway store, said he could not comment on the ordinance. A regional Safeway spokesperson did not immediately answer phone calls Tuesday afternoon.

The text of the ordinance says violators will be fined \$50 but it isn't clear whether that is per violation or per day, Burgess said. Enforcement could be tricky.

"The city doesn't really have the resources or personnel to enforce it," he said.

Other communities in Alaska, including Bethel and Hooper Bay, have banned or tried to tax plastic bags.

Walter Pickett of the Alaska Commercial Company said that 12 of the many communities where the company operates grocery stores in rural Alaska villages have plastic bag bans of some kind. The company provides paper bags instead, he said.

Nationwide, cities like Los Angeles and Seattle have moved to ban plastic bags at supermarket checkout lines.

"It's an idea whose time has come," Lewis said.