

San Gabriel Valley Tribune

Our View: 25 cents a bag better than ban

Posted: 05/19/2009

PAPER or plastic?

That decades-old question at the grocery checkout counter often has a third answer these days: "Neither, thanks."

That's because customers, especially at niche stores such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, are opting - after having been strongly encouraged to so opt - to bring in their own bags in which to carry their groceries home.

Sometimes those sacks are hardy ones that the customer has purchased, often from the stores themselves, that will last for years; sometimes they are (mostly paper) ones provided by the stores that, especially when double-bagged, can stand up to repeated trips back and forth between the market and the home pantry and fridge.

Consumers didn't use to think about where those bags came from, or where they went after one use. We didn't have to. That was before we began to ponder recycling, or waste streams made more gigantic by crazily excessive packaging, or carbon footprints, or deforestation, or the petroleum that goes into plastic sacks - and where that petroleum might come from.

It was way before marine biologists and investigative journalists began to plumb the awful depths of the twice-Texas-sized debris field that floats in the doldrums of the mid-Pacific Ocean, 90 percent of its contents being plastic.

That massive dump, which kills hundreds of thousands of sea birds alone each year - its effects on sea mammals are still being studied, but rest assured they are not good - is our fault. All of ours. And it continues to grow, even as a few begin to make better consumer choices.

Here's how the L.A. Times' Ken Weiss had it in his Pulitzer Prize-winning series on the oceans in 2006: "The average American used 223 pounds of plastic in 2001. The plastics industry expects per-capita usage to increase to 326 pounds by the end of the decade. The qualities that make plastics so useful are precisely what cause them to persist as trash."

So, things are getting worse. While some can be bothered to re-use, recycle - or at least get our plastics into the landfills, where they'll break down any century now - many or even most let it all blow away.

They can't read those signs on the urban street grates, the ones with the fish-skeleton logos: "This drains directly to the ocean."

They don't care when they take a dive under a wave at Zuma or Bolsa Chica and run into a gross, slimy, flimsy, deadly plastic bag.

Or they're store owners who, instead of encouraging, sometimes financially, customers to bring their own bags, continue to hand out the kinds of bags that get discarded right in the parking lot by uncaring customers and end up on our sidewalks, in our streets and in our oceans.

It's that kind of status quo that makes us inclined to support current proposals in the California Assembly to place a 25-cent fee on each plastic and even paper grocery bag.

We know that lobbying groups for the bag and retailing industries want us to wait - for recycling efforts to work better; for higher requirements on the amount of recycling materials in bags; for, we suppose, consumers to stop being litter bugs - but we're tired of waiting.

We don't believe in the plastic-bag ban, such as San Francisco, Palo Alto and Manhattan Beach have instituted. But we do believe that if they're charged a quarter for a bag, consumers will think twice about dropping them into the gutter, or about not using them for the next time they come to the store and the time after that.

Bring your own bag in, as many of us have started to do, and as shoppers have done for generations in other countries, and, hey, this is not a charge you're going to be paying.

Assemblymember Julia Brownley, D-Westlake Village, and Mike Davis, D-Los Angeles, have competing bills that probably will be merged before likely Assembly passage and movement to the Senate. A surprising number of responsible retailers are in support - some because they see this as better than a ban.

We're in support as well. If more Californians can then get to a point where they see the harm that was done and the fee can be relaxed - well, then, we'll look forward to that day when both the albatrosses of Midway and the people of the Golden State don't have to get sickened by all the plastic underfoot.