

Mountain towns banning plastic bags at grocery stores



Mike Kienzle, left, puts his groceries into a box at Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage at the Grand Mesa Center in Grand Junction. Cashier Jeremy Graham is on the right. The store does not offer plastic or paper shopping bags.



Darcy Fisher, a cashier for Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage in Grand Junction, puts groceries into reusable totes. For each reusable bag a customer brings in, the company donates a nickel to a local food bank.

QUICKREAD

CASE AGAINST BAGS

The following is from a fact sheet provided by Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage in support of its decision to no longer provide plastic or paper bags to customers at checkout stands:

“In the USA alone, 14 million trees are cut down each year just to make paper bags.

“The U.S. uses 100 billion plastic bags annually, made from an estimated 12 million barrels of oil. More accurately, plastics are made from the byproducts of oil refining.

“The production of paper bags produces 70 percent more air and 50 times more water pollutants than production of plastic bags. To date, between 1 and 3 percent of plastic bags are recycled each year.”

By Dennis Webb

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Telluride has one.

Aspen is about to impose one.

Carbondale and Basalt voters will decide Tuesday on one.

A movement to ban plastic checkout bags in mountain-town grocery stores is taking off like a tossed-away bag in the spring wind.

“Steamboat is working on it. We’ve heard from Frisco and Breckenridge, Jackson Hole,” said Nathan Ratledge, director of the Community Office for Resource Efficiency, a Roaring Fork Valley nonprofit group that has been helping community groups put ordinances together.

He said the local initiatives grew out of a 2008 call the efficiency office got from the Telluride-based Sheep Mountain Alliance citizen group, seeking to conduct a challenge between Telluride and Aspen to see which resort community could reduce bag usage the most.

Telluride won, but that wasn’t the end of it. The Colorado Association of Ski Towns caught wind of the challenge and, in 2009, held a much bigger challenge involving numerous communities in several states.

Telluride subsequently banned plastic bags and imposed a fee on paper ones, while Roaring Fork Valley communities began evaluating approaches that included bans or fees for plastic bags.

Ultimately, Ratledge said, proponents began to realize a consistent approach made more sense in terms of educating consumers and making things easier for grocers.

The ban Aspen is implementing in May will prohibit plastic bags and impose a 20-cent fee per paper bag. Basalt and Carbondale will be voting on similar ordinances.

The goal, Ratledge said, is to reduce the use of plastic products that consume fossil fuels in their production and mostly don't get reused. They can have life spans of a hundred years and break down into small pieces that pose a danger to animals that eat them, he said.

Just as important, the bag initiatives help promote a broader message about waste in people's lives and the need to reduce consumption, Ratledge said.

"Really you're just raising the consciousness level of what our consumptive habits are actually doing," he said. "... What people start to realize is when you make small changes, all of the sudden, other things start dawning on you."

FIRST BAGS, THEN ...?

But what bag bans and fees might lead to next is exactly what worries Roy Chorbajian, who led a citizens initiative to let voters decide on the issue in Basalt.

"Basically it's government overreach. That's what irritates me. What's the next thing?" Chorbajian said.

He sees it as yet another misguided idea drifting down from Aspen. Chorbajian said most people he knows reuse their plastic grocery bags.

"I don't even use plastic bags, but I have enough tolerance for the people who find a lot of uses for them," he said. "... There are a thousand more things that City Council ought to concern themselves with than these little environmental symbolisms, to pat themselves on the back. I don't think that plastic and paper bags are the things that are destroying the environment."

Tom Clark Sr., chief executive officer of Clark's Markets, which has stores in Telluride, Aspen and Basalt, said his company will do whatever the communities it serves want. But he voiced concerns similar to Chorbajian's about the bag initiatives and said he thinks there are better ways for local governments to address reuse, recycling and reduction of waste.

"What is the government going to tax next to make us have better behaviors? I think that's a real stretch on people's freedoms," he said.

Chorbajian's petition drive for the ballot initiative in Basalt targeted an earlier council proposal to charge fees on plastic bags rather than ban them. When the idea of banning bags instead arose, City Council decided to put the matter to a public vote.

Carbondale's vote Tuesday follows a petition drive by bag-restriction opponents there as well.

Basalt council member Jacque Whitsitt said the issue is most appropriately decided by the public rather than council in her town.

That said, she said she'll probably vote for the proposal Tuesday. She said the proposed restrictions wouldn't necessarily make a huge environmental impact, but are better than doing

nothing. It's not that there's a local problem of plastic-bag litter, but the problem is when the bags aren't recycled, she said.

"When those bags end up in the landfill, they definitely break down into nasty units," Whitsitt said.

Elected officials in Snowmass Village and Glenwood Springs considered the bag issue but are holding off for now and watching how things go in neighboring communities. Likewise, Mountain Village, outside Telluride, and Durango reportedly are considering the issue.

Kelli McGannon, a spokeswoman for City Market, which has stores in Aspen, Basalt and Carbondale, said bans and fees may be more challenging in tourist towns because people on vacation don't usually bring a bag with them.

Clark said the ban in Telluride "is not really a problem from the standpoint of it's not making people hysterical or anything."

He said he doesn't think tourists in Telluride are surprised to be charged for bags. They might not be happy, but they understand it's something communities increasingly are doing these days.

Still, "It's one of those little irritant type of costs that I hate to see it. I don't think it's the way you treat your guests," he said.

McGannon said City Market will support whatever the towns approve, but there will be some logistical challenges with a bag ban. It will require training of employees and dealing with matters such as the fact people buying groceries on government assistance can't be charged for bags, she said.

Aspen's ordinance allows for a small portion of the paper-bag-fee revenue to be returned to grocers to defray their costs, with the remainder going to the city for purposes such as paying the city's cost for the program, public education, and broader recycling and waste-reduction efforts.

McGannon said overall reductions in bag use should save City Market money over time. However, paper bags cost City Market nearly five times what plastic bags do, so in the short term there would be additional expenses.

Bag ban or not, City Market promotes its own sustainability efforts, she said. City Market long gave customers a 5-cent rebate for each reusable bag they used, but recently ended that effort after deciding it had "reached critical mass" in terms of the level of conversion to such bags it was going to achieve, McGannon said.

Another grocery chain, Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage, which is based in Lakewood and has stores in five states, at one point was offering a quarter a bag for people who brought their own.

Still, people weren't changing their ways, said Merredith Branscombe, a company spokeswoman. So, the company proactively adopted policies some governments are only now starting to require.

On Earth Day 2008, it discontinued the use of plastic shopping bags, saving more than a half million bags that year. Since then it has stopped offering paper bags, too.

"Believe it or not, our customers really like it," Branscombe said. "Typically they like not being part of the problem, so we haven't had much negative feedback at all."

She said when the company opens a new store, it gives away tens of thousands of reusable bags to help people adjust to its policy. It also offers customers the use of cardboard boxes it accumulates from wholesale deliveries.

For each reusable bag a customer brings in, it donates a nickel to a local food bank, which adds up to tens of thousands of dollars a year.

REUSABLES NEED WASHING

One concern about reusable bags, which usually are made of cloth, involves hygiene because of contamination of them.

"I'm very uncomfortable with the (lack of) cleanliness of a number of the bags that we see" being brought into Clark's Markets, Clark said. "We believe that some people are going to get sick, and maybe really sick at some point, because of the fact that people rarely wash those reusable bags."

Ratledge said the Community Office for Resource Efficiency's information hasn't indicated that's a major concern. In any event, it's one that can be easily avoided by simply washing the bags on a regular basis, he said.

He also heard the concerns from people who count on reusing plastic grocery bags around the house, including for purposes such as cleaning up after their pets. He found there is plenty of commercial packaging, such as for cereal, that can substitute for such purposes.

"I think that most people will find that unless you have 20 dogs running around your house, there will be ample creative solutions that aren't that difficult," he said.

Branscombe noted plastic bags weren't even used in grocery stores when she was growing up. She thinks the public can find alternatives to them now.

"I think the interesting thing is people are more adaptive than you think they are," she said.