

## Santa Clara County supervisors ban plastic bags

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In a sign of California's cultural creep away from reliance on the ubiquitous plastic shopping bag, Santa Clara County supervisors passed a sweeping ban Tuesday without a single naysayer from the public.

Earlier hearings on the county's two-year effort toward banning plastic carryout bags drew heated opposition from chambers of commerce, merchants and even chemical and oil producers.

But Tuesday's vote had just one opponent, the newest board member and lone Republican, Mike Wasserman, who spoke out for affected wineries and golf courses in his South County district. Wasserman said plastic bags don't really contribute all that much to pollution.

"I question an ordinance that would apply to only a handful of businesses, add unnecessary regulation at unknown costs, and, at the end of the day, only address 1 percent of the trash problem," Wasserman said in an interview.

The ban passed Tuesday takes effect Jan. 1 and will apply to businesses in the county's unincorporated area -- 56 retailers that hand out an estimated 32,000 plastic bags annually. Those retailers will not be able to dispense the plastic shopping bags, although plastic film used for meat, produce and baked goods will still be allowed.

To discourage over-reliance on paper bags, under the new law those bags cannot be distributed for free and must be sold for a minimum of 15 cents each. Stores in violation will be fined up to \$500.

Santa Clara County joins a growing number of California cities and counties that have passed similar bans, including San Jose, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Fairfax, Marin, Los Angeles and Santa Monica. Following the failure of a bill in September that would have banned plastic bags statewide, municipal momentum has since grown in the region, where the cities of Sunnyvale, Milpitas and Mountain View are now in the early stages of considering bag bans.

At Tuesday's hearing, five speakers from environmental groups testified in favor of the ban. No one from the public expressed opposition.

Christopher Chin, director of the nonprofit Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research and Education, told the board that plastic bags are "like other things that seemed like a good idea at the time -- colonialism, asbestos."

But, he added, "They don't make sense anymore. We've evolved, and it's time to move on."

But Wasserman, a Los Gatos resident who noted that he drives a hybrid and, together with his wife, feeds two recycling bins each week, said the ordinance ignores voluntary progress toward recycling and reusing. "If you look around you, you can see change is happening," he said.

In contrast, Supervisors Liz Kniss, Ken Yeager and Dave Cortese said the ban is long overdue, and human habits -- much like smoking and talking on cellphones while driving -- are slow to change.

From behind the dais, Kniss held up the latest in reusable bag options, relying on a rare use of props in the normally staid supervisors' chamber.

Displaying colorful varieties and the convenient way a reusable bag can be collapsed into a purse or briefcase,

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Kniss indicated she was aware that critics will accuse the county of "nannyism."

But she said the ordinance is needed because "the biggest challenge, literally, is changing our culture."

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