

## Santa Clara County supervisors vote to ban plastic and paper bags

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Declaring that the "plastic bag age is over," Santa Clara County supervisors voted Tuesday to ban the distribution of plastic and paper carryout bags at retail stores in unincorporated areas.

The move remains mostly symbolic for now, with a final vote scheduled for October. But the board's intention to begin a ban on "single-use" bags by autumn adds momentum to a statewide campaign to reduce litter and improve the health of marine life.

Similar bans now exist in San Francisco and Palo Alto. The San Jose City Council has approved a ban, which is expected to launch in January, and statewide legislation is pending. And just Tuesday, Santa Cruz County supervisors agreed to move ahead with an ordinance that would eventually ban the use of plastic bags at retail shops and impose a surcharge on paper bags.

"All of these local efforts are really important to actually encouraging the state to do something," said Emily Utter, a representative of the environmental group Save the Bay.

Santa Clara County supervisors intend to ban all paper and plastic bag distribution at 52 retail businesses in the county's vast unincorporated

areas. Those stores alone hand out an estimated 32,000 such bags each year, county officials said.

Thin plastic liner bags would be allowed to protect certain products, including produce, meat, bakery items and frozen and prepared foods. But no plastic bags could be distributed at checkout. Paper bags that are 100 percent recyclable would be allowed for sale under the ordinance but could not be given away for free.

Supervisors reserved a final vote for October, when more will be known about the fate of the statewide bill and about progress in San Jose. The city is conducting an environmental review of its bag ban, which could be challenged by plastic bag manufacturers, delaying the start date.

Supervisors Ken Yeager, Liz Kniss and Dave Cortese said they were frustrated about having to wait, describing the ban as long-overdue environmental stewardship. County staff report that 60 percent of litter found in Bay Area creeks is plastic and that efforts to clean it up cost local governments \$300 million a year.

If an ordinance does indeed go forward, the county estimated it will spend between \$53,500 and \$115,500 this year for outreach and for a consultant to work on an environmental impact report. The money would come from reserve funds.

Supervisor Don Gage cast the lone dissenting vote, expressing concerns voiced by the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and businesses in his district, where most of the 52 affected establishments are located.

Gage urged the board to delay the ban further, a position backed by former Assemblyman and San Jose Councilman Manny Diaz, now a lobbyist for the

American Chemistry Council. The council has been a vigorous opponent of local bag bans, arguing that many people reuse plastic bags to line waste baskets and scoop up pet waste.

There's "a lot of misinformation going on here," Diaz said, claiming that "plastic bags represent one-half of one percent of all the litter out there."

Somewhat more tempered resistance has come from the California Grocers Association, whose lobbyist told the Mercury News Tuesday that members "do encourage reusable bags, but we'd rather not have anybody telling us we have to."

Kniss countered that businesses will likely save money by not having to buy bags and then give them away for free.

Shoppers interviewed outside a Mountain View Walmart store Tuesday illustrated how consumer habits can change. The local store recently conducted a trial period during which no plastic bags were distributed; instead, the store offered a 15-cent reusable bag. Although the store is back to distributing plastic for free, numerous shoppers could be seen Tuesday with the blue reusable varieties.

"I carry it with me wherever I go," said Sunnyvale retiree Jeannie Flores. "People are basically lazy, they want convenience — they're not thinking about the environment."

But welder Gary Miller grumbled on his way into the store. Balled in his fist was a blue bag his wife made him bring.

"My wife's all into that — she's got these bags that are real cool and fold up in her purse," Miller said.

"But of course, I don't have a purse."

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