

## Paper or Plastic?

By [ROB DAVIS](#)

**Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2008** | When volunteers scoured San Diego County's beaches for litter this year and last, they plucked 12,409 plastic bags from the sandy seashore.

San Diego's City Council is poised to consider Wednesday whether to address that type of litter at its source. A council subcommittee will discuss Wednesday morning whether the city should outlaw the use of plastic bags in grocery stores and pharmacies.

Plastic bags have become ubiquitous in California: Residents use an estimated 19 billion annually -- 519 per person. And while once viewed as more environmentally friendly than paper -- no trees are chopped down to make a plastic bag -- cities across the state are increasingly targeting the one-use flimsy plastic sacks as a way to reduce litter, cut petroleum consumption and ultimately facilitate a shift to reusable bags. San Francisco, Malibu, Fairfax and Manhattan Beach have all banned plastic bags, which unlike paper do not break down easily in the environment.

San Diego's proposed law would require large grocery stores and pharmacies to stop bagging items in plastic as of July 1, 2009. They'd instead be required to use recyclable paper bags or cloth bags. Customers would have to pay a 25-cent fee for each paper bag, aiming to increase cloth-bag use.

Those lobbying for the ban say it's an important step in keeping bags out of an ocean increasingly beset by plastic pollution. Turtles can mistake bags for jellyfish and suffocate or suffer clogged intestines when they eat them.

"We need to change our behavior as consumers and think about where these bags are going after we're done with them," said Danielle Miller, outreach director for San Diego Coastkeeper, an environmental group supporting a ban. "There's an impact to the beach and the community. We don't want our beaches to be strewn with plastic bag litter."

Bans elsewhere have had different motives. In San Francisco, which approved a ban in March 2007, the city wanted to keep residents from putting plastic bags into their curbside recycling bins, said Mark Westlund, spokesman for the city's Environment Department. The city doesn't accept bags in its curbside program and found them getting caught in the gears of its recyclables sorting facility, Westlund said. Reducing litter was a side benefit, he said, not the main thrust.

The American Chemistry Council, a lobbying group representing plastics manufacturers, opposes bans and says promoting bag recycling efforts is a better option. San Diego does not include plastic bags in its curbside recycling program.

"By forcing a ban on plastic, you'll just go to some competing material," said Tim Shestek, a council spokesman. "We're not suggesting we're better or paper's better -- we think recycling is really the answer."

California residents only recycle a small number of their plastic bags. The California Integrated Waste Management Board estimates they recycle 5 percent of bags.

The state has taken some steps to increase plastic-bag recycling at grocery stores and pharmacies throughout California. Since July 2007, stores have been required to provide plastic bag recycling receptacles for customers and make reusable cloth bags available. Evidence so far suggests the effort has not been particularly effective.

Charlene Graham, a board spokeswoman, said early data collected by retailers indicate those expanded recycling efforts netted an additional 1 percent of plastic bags. (A formal report will be released in May 2009.)

Other cities in the region have flirted with plastic bag bans. Solana Beach banned using plastic bags for door hangers and advertisements. The city also signed an agreement to deliver its residents' plastic grocery bags to a company that recycles them into outdoor fencing. Encinitas, which has been weighing a ban on plastic bags in stores, is currently drafting an ordinance for its City Council to consider.

In San Diego, the council's natural resources committee would have to first approve [the ordinance](#) and send it to the full council for a hearing. The committee meets Wednesday at 9 a.m. (earlier than its typical 2 p.m. meeting time) at City Hall.

If the proposal clears the committee Wednesday -- Coastkeeper's Miller said she was hopeful it would -- it would not be heard at council until next year, when new members are in place.

Mayor Jerry Sanders has not taken a position, a spokesman said. Councilman Kevin Faulconer and Councilwoman Donna Frye, the two non termed-out members of the natural resources committee, could not be reached for comment Monday.

*Please contact [Rob Davis](#) directly at [rob.davis@voiceofsandiego.org](mailto:rob.davis@voiceofsandiego.org) with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips. Or set the tone of the debate with [a letter to the editor](#).*

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