

Plastic Bag Ban Finally Coming to Los Altos, Polystyrene Ban Could Be Too

On July 4, the city will join most of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties in implementing a reusable bag ordinance.

Posted by [Katherine Hafner](#) (Editor), June 28, 2013 at 05:39 pm



A sign notifying Los Altos residents of the upcoming ban, outside DeMartini orchard. The signs are part of the city's outreach effort. Photo credit / Katherine Hafner

By Katherine Hafner

Come July 4, Los Altos residents will join most of Santa Clara County in needing to grab their reusable bags when heading out locally to shop, or having to pay an extra dime on the way out of the store.

Many cities in the county, including San Jose and Mountain View, have recently implemented a plastic bag ban, or reusable bag ordinance. Palo Alto has even had a supermarket-specific ban in place for about five years.

Los Altos is one of a few cities in the county that have passed the ordinance, but is still preparing.

The widespread concept began when officials of San Mateo County offered to conduct an environmental impact report for many cities in Santa Clara County as well as their own, said Kathy Kleinbaum, economic development manager for the city of Los Altos.

The EIR was seen as necessary to withstand legal challenges like [lawsuits leveled against San Francisco and other communities](#) for failing to prepare one in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act, [Patch reported last January](#).

After assessing that eliminating single-use plastic bags from store counters would be environmentally beneficial, most of San Mateo County then passed a ban to do so, said Dean Peterson, director for environmental services for San Mateo County.

One major goal was to reduce litter in stormwater drains, and in Los Altos reduce the city's trash by 40 percent by July 2014, per the [San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board](#), to avoid rates rising.

In Santa Clara County, the implementation of the reusable bag ordinance has spread over the course of this year.

Los Altos' ordinance goes into effect July 4 – intended partly to coincide with Independence Day for publicity, Kleinbaum said.

"It's 'independence from plastic bags,' as we see it," she said, laughing.

The reusable bag ordinance bans the use of single-use plastic bags at all grocery and retail stores. It does not apply to food service establishments at this stage.

Under the ordinance, reusable bags are strongly encouraged as an alternative, but paper bags are also an option at the stores – for a minimum charge of \$0.10. The charge for paper bags is also set to automatically increase to \$0.25 starting in 2015.

Julie Weiss, an environmental specialist at the city of Palo Alto, said the bag charge makes it apparent to the consumer where their money is going.

"The truth of the matter is they've never been free ... they're built into the charge of the merchandise you were purchasing," Weiss said. "But now its 'oh I'm buying this' – that's when the lightbulb can go on and inspire behavior changes."

Weiss said Palo Alto was the first city in the county to implement a bag ban, back in 2009. Palo Alto's original, experimental ordinance did not apply to all retail stores or enforce a charge on paper bags, she said. But starting Monday in the city, updates to the ordinance change that. In November, Palo Alto is also extending the bag ban to restaurants, she said.

Many cities' bans went in effect to coincide with Earth Day back in April, including most cities in San Mateo County and a few in Santa Clara County.

Kleinbaum said in Los Altos, however, the city's staff felt they needed more time to prepare.

The outreach process involved contacting businesses and residents to notify them of the ban – including mail packets, door-to-door followups, flyers, signs in parking lots, public forums and handing out reusable bags.

To fund the process, the city requested money from the Los Altos City Council, which granted it after several attempts, Kleinbaum said.

The city used \$10,000 to fund outreach including the printing and mailing of all the products, and a main portion – \$6,000 – to buy reusable bags to distribute prior to July 4, she added.

Kleinbaum said the city of Los Altos has received some complaints about the upcoming change, but often because citizens think they can no longer use plastic bags for anything. With the new ordinance, residents can still buy plastic bags that are sold at stores as products, just not store-given, single-use ones to carry out items.

Kleinbaum said people were disappointed when they stopped handing out the reusable bags at the farmer's market.

"It's good we weren't the first adopters," she said. "Most people are used to the ban by now."

Los Altos has also been considering a ban on polystyrene, or styrofoam.

The town of Los Altos Hills already has a polystyrene and non-recyclable food container ban in place, as of June 2012, said Nicole Horvitz, assistant city planner for Los Altos Hills.

Though Los Altos Hills does not have retail businesses, the ban applies to Foothill Community College, private schools in the area, food vendors and town functions like the town picnic. The ban does not apply to public schools directly, because cities and counties do not have explicit authority to impose health-based ordinances on public school districts. However, it would apply to private contractors that provide food services for public schools.

Kleinbaum said a similar polystyrene ban is currently in progress to take to the Los Altos City Council, likely by fall of this year.

She added that many cities including Los Altos plan to assemble a vendor fair, inviting local businesses to learn about alternative options to polystyrene well ahead of the implementation of such a ban.