

Plastics groups line up against Palo Alto's proposed bag ban

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Industry groups are lining up against Palo Alto's proposed ban on plastic grocery bags, but the city isn't buying their arguments.

Spokespeople for organizations ranging from the American Chemistry Council to SaveThePlasticBag.com stood up at a city council meeting Monday to make the case that the ban would be a step backward for both the local economy and the environment. They contended it would cut into grocers' revenues, force a shift to equally harmful paper bags and undercut recent advances in plastic bag recycling.

Some flatly opposed Palo Alto's plan outright, with one group threatening a lawsuit. Others said they hoped to cooperate with the city to improve it. One container company even offered to provide Palo Alto with the infrastructure needed to recycle certain types of foam if the city would reconsider its proposal to prohibit them.

So far, no sale. Swayed more by the city's own research — and perhaps encouraged by the environmentally minded pleas of a local Girl Scouts troop — the council informally gave staff the nod to move forward with its original plan.

Ultimately aimed at promoting the use of reusable shopping bags, the plan's first phase would be a ban on single-use plastic bags at large grocers beginning on Earth Day 2009, April 22. That would

likely be followed quickly by a ban on disposable Styrofoam food containers, and eventually also by a fee on paper grocery bags. Later phases could expand the restrictions to convenience stores, pharmacies and other small businesses.

Plastic bags are being targeted first because of their tendency to drift into creek beds and other environmentally sensitive areas. There, environmentalists warn, they can disintegrate and be consumed by animals.

Stephen Joseph, counsel for SaveThePlasticBag.com, said such concerns were fueled less by reality than by "superficial misinformation."

"There's a lot of bottles, a lot of trash in creeks, but not a lot of plastic bags," he said. "Turtles are not dying from eating plastic bags."

Joseph accused the city staff of presenting only "one side of the story" and threatened to sue the city if the ban goes into effect.

The American Chemistry Council, a trade group that includes plastics manufacturers, took a gentler tack, presenting the city with information sheets and data they said show that bag bans don't work. The group cited a "litter audit" in San Francisco after that city banned plastic grocery bags, which showed no reduction in the number of such bags found on sidewalks.

"The experience we've seen in jurisdictions like San Francisco (is that) most folks are going to start to use paper bags, which have their own environmental impacts — in some cases much more," said Tim Shestek, the council's state affairs director.

Michael Westerfield, West Coast director of recycling for Redlands-based Dart Container Corp., took aim at the city's idea to ban Styrofoam food and

drink containers. He said many businesses would switch to plastic-lined paper containers such as Starbucks cups, which can't be recycled at all.

He said his company could provide Palo Alto with equipment that can recycle Styrofoam.

Phil Bobel, the city's environmental compliance manager, said Wednesday that the city would look into that idea. But he cautioned that most Styrofoam recycling technology comes with its own drawbacks, including the difficulty of transporting the waste to the recycling facility.

Like plastic bags, Bobel said, Styrofoam is very difficult to separate from other types of waste and so can't be collected curbside.

Bobel acknowledged paper bags come with their own environmental problems, but he said the city has decided to focus on plastic because it's more likely to float away and damage natural habitats. He said it's not surprising San Francisco's litter audit found few plastic bags, because many end up landing in the sea, where they can never be recovered.

Council Member Yoriko Kishimoto said she appreciates the input from plastic bag proponents, especially those that approached the city cooperatively rather than confrontationally. She simply hasn't been convinced by their arguments that plastic bag recycling can solve the litter problem.

"I would just point to the fact that we've been trying to do that for 20 years, and we're still at 5 percent" of plastic bags being diverted from landfills, she said.

City staff plans to bring the first phase of the plastic bag ban to the city council for a vote in December.

There's no timeline yet for a potential 25-cent fee on paper bags, which Bobel said needs more study to determine its impacts.

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