

# Plastic bag ban starts Monday

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A new policy takes effect Monday throughout San Luis Obispo County, and it can be summed up in four letters: B.Y.O.B.

That stands for “bring your own bags,” and it’s a slogan that Patti Toews hopes local residents remember when they go into supermarkets, pharmacies, sporting goods retailers and convenience stores.

An ordinance adopted by the San Luis Obispo County Integrated Waste Management Authority board in January banned plastic bags at most stores in the county, but allows them to distribute paper bags if they charge customers 10 cents per bag.

Over the past nine months, Toews, program manager for the waste management authority, has visited every single store in the county affected by the new rules — about 375 outlets — and has taken hundreds of phone calls and answered countless questions.

Her job has been to educate retailers and customers about the change, how they can prepare for it and who they should call with questions — namely, her.

I don’t want them to yell at that clerk,” Toews said. “I want them to yell at me.”

Pop into your neighborhood market and you’ll likely see a yellow, laminated card with information about the ban as well as Toews’ contact information. Many stores have also created their own signs reminding customers to bring their bags.

A small sign reading “B.Y.O. Bags” was posted Thursday on the glass entrance of SLO Fresh Market on Laurel Lane in San Luis Obispo. White plastic bags still remained on the check-out counters; nearby, blue reusable bags hung on racks for sale.

I have been warning my customers for over a month now,” owner Gwen Schmidt said. “I’m trying to make it as easy as possible on everyone.”

Most of Schmidt’s customers are aware of the upcoming ban, and are dealing with it in different ways: some people have told her they’re hoarding plastic bags, others have stopped taking them already. “We’re just going to have to get into the habit of it,” Schmidt said. “We don’t have a choice.”

Outside Trader Joe’s in San Luis Obispo, Ginny Martinet grabbed a basket and then paused to look at some plants. A few reusable bags sat in her cart.

“I used to just bring them to Trader Joe’s, but now I’m starting to take them to other stores as well,” she said.

While her habits are changing, Martinet, of Avila Beach, isn’t in favor of the ban. She’ll miss plastic bags, which she uses for trash and other purposes, and while she likes paper bags, she doesn’t want to pay 10 cents each for them.

“I think it’s a ruse,” she said of the ban. “I think we’ve gone overboard on regulation. I just feel like pretty soon, we’re going to have to ask permission to breathe.”

Outside the Food 4 Less a few doors down, shopper Chris Kellett of Los Osos wasn’t concerned about the ban; she prefers paper bags over plastic because “things don’t fall over.”

“I know that plastic bags can cause all sorts of damage,” Kellett said. “I heard paper uses a chemical process, but at least paper is a renewable resource.”

She often uses reusable bags when shopping at Trader Joe’s but will soon need to start bringing them to Food 4 Less as well — or pay a little more for paper.

Like other grocery stores, Food 4 Less will have paper bags available, but they’ll be in a different location, said Bob Gutierrez, the company’s director of government affairs. The store has locations in Atascadero, Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo.

Unlike many other supermarkets, customers at Food 4 Less bag their own groceries. Starting Monday, shoppers will still bag their items, but they’ll have to estimate the number of paper bags they need and buy them as they pay for their groceries.

Cashiers have received training to help shoppers determine how many bags they might need, and to suggest ways to reduce the number by not bagging milk, soda, or some boxed goods, for example. Store employees have seen an increase in sales of reusable bags, Gutierrez said.

Local Target stores will distribute a free reusable bag to each shopper at the checkout counter Monday, though supplies are limited, Target spokeswoman Jessica Stevens said in an emailed statement. Reusable bags are also available for purchase.

Starting Monday, Target stores will offer paper bags at the checkout counter — for a 10-cent fee per bag — and redistribute its plastic bags to neighboring stores or a nearby distribution center.

Shoppers who use reusable bags will receive a five-cent discount per bag, Stevens said.

Toews said some stores — about seven or eight clothing retailers — likely won’t carry paper bags at all, either requesting customers bring their own bags or carry the items out of the store in a cart or simply un-bagged.

But other stores, like grocery stores, liquor stores and “mom-and-pop shops” will have paper bags, just in case. It is legal to carry liquor out of a store without a bag, Toews added.

“Honestly, the majority of times you just don’t need a bag at a convenience store,” Toews said. “People are going to stop and think, ‘Do I need a bag? Will I pay 10 cents for that bag?’ ”

Overall, Toews said, the response from retailers has been understanding, and in some cases, embraced. “To be quite frank with you, margins are tight, the economy is tight and it costs a lot of money to hand out bags for free,” she said. “Hopefully they just break even as opposed to another government regulation that costs them more money.”

Tribune staff writer Tonya Strickland contributed to this report.