

REGION: PLASTIC-BAG RECYCLING LAW CLEARS ASSEMBLY, HEADS FOR SENATE

By DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer for North County Times
Last modified Sunday, June 1, 2008 6:22 PM PDT

In a little more than two years, shoppers could find themselves paying a quarter for every plastic or paper bag they use to bag groceries.

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Los Angeles, wrote a law earlier that required stores to set up containers for shoppers to drop off old plastic bags last summer. In a telephone interview Friday, he said most of the 7,000 stores statewide covered by the legislation have complied, and the recycling rate has doubled from 2 percent to 4 percent.

But Levine said California can and must do much better and it is time to pass a law "with some teeth in it."

So, this year, Levine is sponsoring legislation to require stores to slash their use of plastic bags 70 percent, as measured by weight, by 2010 ---- or begin charging 25 cents for each bag they issue starting Jan. 1, 2011. That's the basic thrust of his Assembly Bill 2058, which passed the Assembly last Wednesday on a 42-31 party-line vote, with majority Democrats pushing it through.

Beth Willon, a spokeswoman for the lawmaker, said the bill now goes to the Senate where it will be heard by the Environmental Quality Committee.

Levine said he expects strong opposition from Republicans there, too, though he believes the legislation has a good chance of passing.

The bill is another major California environmental initiative.

Area residents long have been accustomed to recycling their aluminum, glass and plastic beverage containers, as well as their newspapers and cardboard products. And they are warming to the idea of returning their outdated computers and cell phones.

Now, Levine wants them to focus attention on the need to recycle those plastic grocery bags.

However, conservative lawmakers say the legislation is the wrong approach to another aspect of California's litter problem.

Assembly Republicans voted against it because, they said, the bill would add hundreds of dollars to the family budgets of Californians at a time when the economy is teetering on, if not already in, recession.

"Hard-working Californians are struggling to pay record-high prices for food and gas," said Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines of Fresno. "The last thing they need is higher taxes. This bill will hurt families by forcing shoppers to pay a new tax on every paper and plastic bag they use at grocery stores."

But Levine countered that families can choose not to pay the fees.

"Call my office," he said. "I will give you a reusable bag. You will not have to pay the fee. It's as simple as that."

And Levine discounted the notion that toting a reusable bag to the store would be a burden.

"It's not like you're going to have to drag an elephant into the store," he said. "I know it sounds revolutionary. But give it a try."

Some stores are already gearing up for what would amount to a wholesale shopping cultural shift.

At Henry's Marketplace in Poway, for example, reusable canvas bags that retail for \$4.99 already are being sold and less expensive models are on the way, said Aimee Della Bitta, a spokeswoman for the store.

And she said Henry's Marketplace pays customers a nickel when they return with old plastic bags to reload with groceries.

"We are definitely in line with trying to get our customers to reuse their bags," Della Bitta said.

Tiffany Moffatt, a spokeswoman for Wal-Mart in Sacramento, said the big retail chain's California stores have plastic-bag recycling receptacles and sell cloth reusable bags for \$1 apiece. But she said the company has no position on the bill.

The bill covers stores that sell grocery and pharmaceutical products, and consequently would apply to Wal-Mart and Rite Aid stores as well as grocers, Levine said. It would not, however, apply to home improvement stores such as Home Depot.

Mo Hamida, a worker at the San Marcos Market, said the 25-cent-per-bag proposal sounded extreme.

"It's just one more thing that we have to brush off as the cost of living in California, I guess," Hamida said. "It's just another hoop for us to go through. But I think it's pretty ridiculous. We do have to save the earth. But come on, a quarter per bag if it (the 70 percent target) doesn't happen?"

GOP members in the Assembly suggested the quarter-per-bag charge is out of line considering that it only costs a few cents to make one.

Levine suggested Republicans have missed the point.

"The idea isn't to reflect the cost of the bag," Levine said. "What is a cigarette tax? Does it reflect the cost of cigarettes? No. Does a speeding ticket reflect the cost of speeding? No. What we're trying to do is change behavior."

And Levine said there is plenty of reason for trying to do that.

He cited state statistics that nearly 150,000 tons of plastics bags are thrown into landfills annually. And he said a survey of trash picked up along the Los Angeles River found that 40 percent of it, as measured by volume, amounted to all types of plastic shopping bags.

Levine said Californians use nearly 20 billion bags a year, with each shopper using an average of 555.

"We're talking about a very serious problem and, hopefully, a very significant part of the solution," he said.

And, by the way, he said, he's not attempting to reopen the paper-vs.-plastic debate, noting that a shift to paper bags would mean cutting down many more trees.

"We want to make sure that we don't shove people from one to the other," Levine said. "It's not paper vs. plastic. It's neither. It's 'I brought my own.'"

Contact staff writer Dave Downey at (760) 745-6611, Ext. 2623, or ddowney@nctimes.com.