

## San Jose's big bag ban started small

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San Jose's bold move this week to enact the country's strictest ban on grocery bags wasn't the brainchild of the council's outspoken "green mayor," Chuck Reed. The trailblazer behind the idea was a soft-spoken former restaurateur who's made few waves during his time on the council — Councilman Kansen Chu.

What began with an epiphany when a grocer in Taiwan charged Chu for a plastic bag has turned into an unlikely crusade that resulted in a City Council vote to ban not only plastic but also most paper bags.

Chu, 57, wasn't looking to become the local hero in an environmental battle that has stymied greener cities such as Seattle, whose voters last month voted to overturn a fee on plastic and paper bags.

But, as John Stufflebean, director of the San Jose's Environmental Services Department said, "He was the spark that got things started."

The ban, which must still go through an environmental impact study that will require the council's final signoff next year, won't go into effect until 2011, allowing time for additional outreach to businesses and consumers. It would bar retailers from giving customers single-use plastic bags and would allow paper bags made with 40 percent recycled materials, but only for a fee. Restaurants and nonprofits could continue to use paper or plastic bags.

Chu's interest in the environment isn't a passing fancy. In June, the council agreed to adopt his proposal to establish green building standards on all new buildings.

"We all have a responsibility to make our planet a better place for our children and grandchildren," he said.

Chu said the idea of a ban on plastic shopping bags took shape soon after he was elected to the council in June 2007. While visiting his sister-in-law in Taipei, Chu went grocery shopping and was surprised to get charged for plastic grocery bags. The next day, he brought his own cloth bags back to the store.

"I guess the question," said Chu, "was, 'Why not San Jose?'" He began a conversation with the city's environmental services staff, which later moved to council committee discussions.

"My first impression was that he was tilting at windmills," said Councilman Sam Liccardo, who later joined Chu as a supporter in the effort. "But as I

thought about the issue more and more, I realized Kansen was on to something, particularly after we had an opportunity to hear from people in the garbage and recycling industry who confirmed that these bags are creating enormous cost burdens on ratepayers, in addition to all the environmental problems."

Chu said his idea met with some initial resistance from the Santa Clara County Recycling and Waste Reduction Commission, which serves as the principal advisory body to city and town councils and the county Board of Supervisors on waste planning issues.

"We knew that the plastic bag industry was suing Oakland, and cities were very concerned about the legal issues," he said. "That's when we started pushing for banning paper as well as plastic, because paper bags aren't environmentally friendly either."

For now, Chu said he is pleased with Tuesday's 9-1 vote. But he said there will be more environmental battles ahead.

"I believe the ordinance to ban the plastic bags will trigger more discussions and will trigger more education about the strong impact these bags have on our environment, how they litter our creeks and endanger our marine animals," he said.

Opponents of San Jose's action, such as the American Chemistry Council, were disappointed but not surprised by the vote, said spokesman Tim Shestek on Wednesday. But, he said, the council "welcomes the idea" of the city conducting its environmental impact review, and he said his group will be "engaged" in that process.

"When you look at how plastics are made and transported and used, I think you're going to come to the conclusion that there are some significant benefits to those products," said Shestek, who added that the council has no plans to sue the city.

David Lewis, executive director of the environmental advocacy group Save The Bay, said San Jose's vote will resonate. On Tuesday, top elected officials from cities in Santa Clara County voiced their support for the ban.

"The plastics industry has fought these efforts tooth and nail, but I would hope they recognize how deep the support is in San Jose and throughout the Bay Area for banning plastic bag pollution," said Lewis.

In 2007, San Francisco enacted a ban on single-use plastic grocery bags. And just last week, Palo Alto started its ban. "And the world did not end," said Lewis of the new law. "People adjusted just fine."



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