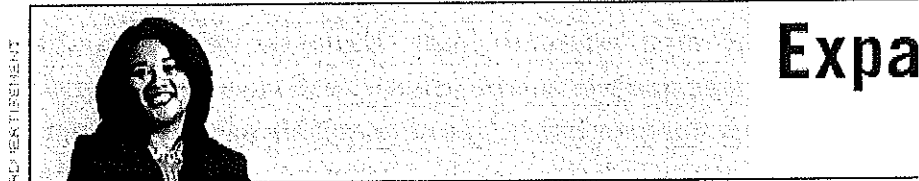


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San Francisco Chronicle

S.F. FIRST CITY TO BAN PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS

Supermarkets and chain pharmacies will have to use recyclable or compostable sacks

Charlie Goodyear, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Paper or plastic? Not anymore in San Francisco.

The city's Board of Supervisors approved groundbreaking legislation Tuesday to outlaw plastic checkout bags at large supermarkets in about six months and large chain pharmacies in about a year.



The ordinance, sponsored by Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, is the first such law in any city in the United States and has been drawing global scrutiny this week.

"I am astounded and surprised by the worldwide attention," Mirkarimi said. "Hopefully, other cities and other states will follow suit."

Fifty years ago, plastic bags -- starting first with the sandwich bag -- were seen in the United States as a more sanitary and environmentally friendly alternative to the deforesting paper bag. Now an estimated 180 million plastic bags are distributed to shoppers each year in San Francisco. Made of filmy plastic, they are hard to recycle and easily blow into trees and waterways, where they are blamed for killing marine life. They also occupy much-needed landfill space.

Two years ago, San Francisco officials considered imposing a 17-cent tax on petroleum-based plastic bags before reaching a deal with the California Grocers Association. The agreement called for large supermarkets to reduce by 10 million the number of bags given to shoppers in 2006. The grocers association said it cut back by 7.6 million, but city officials called that figure unreliable and unverifiable because of poor data supplied by markets.

The dispute led to a renewed interest in outlawing the standard plastic bag, which Mirkarimi

said Tuesday was a "relic of the past." Under the legislation, which passed 10-1 in the first of two votes, large markets and pharmacies will have the option of using compostable bags made of corn starch or bags made of recyclable paper. San Francisco will join a number of countries, such as Ireland, that already have outlawed plastic bags or have levied a tax on them. Final passage of the legislation is expected at the board's next scheduled meeting, and the mayor is expected to sign it.

The grocers association has warned that the new law will lead to higher prices for San Francisco shoppers.

"We're disappointed that the Board of Supervisors is going down this path," said Kristin Power, the association's vice president for government relations. "It will frustrate recycling efforts and will increase both consumer and retailer costs. There's also a real concern about the availability and quality of compostable bags."

Power said most of the group's members operating in San Francisco are likely to switch to paper bags "simply because of the affordability and availability issues."

Mirkarimi's legislation is one in a string of environmentally sensitive measures -- such as outlawing Styrofoam food containers and encouraging clean-fuel construction vehicles at city job sites -- adopted by the city in recent months.

"It's really exciting," Jared Blumenfeld, director of the city's Department of the Environment, said after the vote on Tuesday. "We're thrilled. It's been a long time in the making."

Blumenfeld said it takes 430,000 gallons of oil to manufacture 100 million bags. Compostable bags can be recycled in the city's green garbage bins and will make it more convenient for residents to recycle food scraps, he said.

Recycling of paper bags also is far more active today than it was when the plastic bag was first introduced to U.S. consumers.

The lone dissenting voice in the board chamber on Tuesday was Supervisor Ed Jew, who noted that 95,000 small businesses in San Francisco will continue to use plastic bags. Jew, who in his third month in office has taken to critiquing his colleagues for being too quick to burden residents and businesses with new mandates, complained that Mirkarimi's legislation has taken too much of the board's time.

"We need to move on to address the larger issues in San Francisco," Jew said shortly before he voted against the ordinance.

Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier, who introduced amendments this month that will subject pharmacy chains to the legislation, said many large businesses in San Francisco already participate in recycling programs.

"The target of this legislation is the bags themselves and improving the environment," she said.

Plastic bags by the numbers

180 million

Roughly the number of plastic shopping bags distributed in San Francisco each year.

2 to 3 cents

Amount each bag costs markets, compared with anywhere from 5 to 10 cents for a biodegradable bag.

4 trillion to 5 trillion

Number of nondegradable plastic bags used worldwide annually.

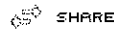
430,000 gallons

Amount of oil needed to produce 100 million nondegradable plastic bags.

Source: S.F. Department of the Environment; Worldwatch Institute

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