

Garza: Plastic bags are never truly free

By Mariel Garza

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As I walked through the park with the dogs Friday morning, I picked up an empty plastic bag from El Super grocery store that was stuck to a bush. I dropped it in a trash bin, even though it was a somewhat futile gesture.

The park was - and always seems to be - littered with discarded plastic bags that had been left behind after picnics, had escaped from trash cans or simply been tossed into the brush by uncaring parkgoers.

I don't know why I picked up that particular bag. It's not like it means anything. And there's a not-unlikely chance that the bag would be set free once again by a scavenger pawing through the trash looking for recyclables.

Even if it does make it to a landfill, it will be decades until it turns into something other than a plastic El Super bag. In the meantime, there are a million more bags to replace it and, thanks to the cravenness of the California Senate, millions more to be distributed and let free into our parks, our rivers and our oceans.

I wish the state senators who voted against the proposed ban last week would come on one of my morning walks around Los Angeles. Or visit the section of the L.A. River that flows next to the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. After picking scores of plastic bags out of the trees and brush, they might realize this is more than a feel-good environmental issue; it's about quality of life in our neighborhoods, our parks and streets.

Sure, plastic bags aren't the only trash clogging our gutters, piling up in vacant lots, and twining around the vegetation in our urban rivers. But they are the most ubiquitous. In the end, like everything else in the state Legislature, the bill was defeated with the help of vigorous lobbying from the chemical companies that make the bags. I can't say I blame them for being worried about the future of the plastic bag market. California is a pretty influential. If a ban works here, how long before it spreads across America?

What they must realize is that the days of the free plastic bag are numbered, and stopping a comprehensive statewide ban won't change that. In fact, it will likely make it even harder for local and national retailers because cities across the state are going ahead with their own bans.

It's not even that difficult. Just look at Ikea. The Swedish furnishings retailer decided a few years ago that it no longer wanted to provide free plastic bags to consumers. There was no big ad campaign; it simply changed policy. When customers got to the checkout they were given the option of paying a few cents for a plastic bag, a few more cents for a big blue reusable Ikea bag or paying nothing and hauling it out by hand. Did people stop shopping at Ikea? No. They adjusted. And now it's second-nature to pack some bags on the Sunday family Ikea outing.

Generally, I object to unreasonable invasion of government into the choices individuals make. I think fast-food bans and smoking bans are an overreach; people should be able to pollute themselves if they want to. But those horrible plastic bags pollute everything. They have become a public nuisance with untold cost to taxpayers.

Nor are they really free. Someone's got to pay for them, and you can bet it's not the retailers, who figure in the costs of overhead, including bags, into the price for your cereal.

Someone's also got to pay to clean up parks and keep up landfills. And someone's got to pay for the screens to keep the plastic bags from flowing into the sewers and then into the oceans. In Los Angeles, guess what? That's you and me. Voters passed Measure O in 2004, a bond to pay for projects to keep trash from flowing out to sea, including those fun gutter screens that get clogged with plastic bags and flood the intersections during rainy season. Check out your property tax bill to see just how much those "free" plastic bags are costing you each year.

Luckily we have the freedom not to have to wait for the politicians or retailers to see the light. Enact your own personal single-use plastic bag ban today. It might seem as futile as my collecting stray plastic bags in the park, but if, like me, you care about your neighborhood and city, you'll do it anyway.

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