

Plastics industry pushing against shopping bag fees in Santa Clara County

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Lobbyists for the plastics industry are hard at work in Santa Clara County these days, as cities inch closer to prying those polluting but so-convenient carryout bags from shoppers' clutches.

An international movement is aiming to impose fees and bans to scale back the ubiquitous plastic bag proliferation that researchers say strangles sea life and overwhelms landfills. But plastic producers won't have it, and they are piling resources into influential Silicon Valley, a region that could help tip the entire state closer to bag-limiting laws.

"The biggest concerns are coming from plastic-bag manufacturers," said Santa Clara Councilwoman Jamie McLeod, chair of a county commission that's gathering input on a proposed 25-cent bag fee.

McLeod and other county leaders say the lobbying campaign has included misinformation and heightened concern even among businesses that

would not be affected by the fee. But the proposal's foes say they're merely trying to head off a meddlesome government policy that would hike costs for consumers in a down economy.

From San Francisco to Los Angeles, similar ordinances now prompt shoppers to bring their own reusable bags, and many more cities from Mendocino to San Diego are weighing such efforts. Next month, Palo Alto will vote whether to ban plastic bags outright in grocery stores and may consider a to-be-determined charge on paper bags.

Santa Clara County will take a small but symbolic step Feb. 25, when its recycling and waste reduction commission votes on a model plan for the whole valley. Similar to two proposed state bills, the effort would recommend a 25-cent fee on plastic and paper bags at grocery, convenience and retail stores. Fees would be capped at \$2 per customer, with exemptions for shoppers using food stamps and federal nutrition subsidies for low-income women and young children. Any money collected by the county would be poured into conservation and recycling efforts.

The proposal would have to be passed by county supervisors and by individual city councils to take effect countywide. Although the county discussions have so far been preliminary, the Virginia-based American Chemistry Council is not taking any chances, rallying troops with talking points and bombarding local news outlets with calls and e-mail alerts.

Former Assemblyman Manny Diaz, a well-connected South Bay politician-turned lobbyist, is among the industry's bag-promoting soldiers. In a public meeting in San Jose this week, Diaz said the proposed fee wouldn't encourage shoppers to start bringing bags: "We're talking about creating a punitive measure that's going to impact families

\$300 a year."

Diaz's industry group is feverishly pitching ads to consumers nationwide that say plastics are getting a bum rap.

His industry is promoting more recycling and reuse of plastic bags. And it's successfully gathering forces. Christine Carr, a 7-Eleven store marketer, attended San Jose's meeting with a box full of some 1,400 petitions she said customers had filled out over the course of a week.

Proponents of the fee argue that customers don't understand the bags they receive in stores for "free" have hidden costs. Before San Francisco made history in 2007 by banning plastic bags at supermarkets and chain drugstores, officials there estimated that each bag cost city taxpayers 17 cents to remove from streets, parks, gutters and storm drains. Residents also bear the costs of garbage collection — plastic bags amount to roughly 60 percent of Santa Clara County trash. In San Jose alone, it costs millions of dollars to fish difficult-to-recycle bags from the waste stream.

McLeod said the recycling commission has spent almost a year gathering input before voting. Environmental groups such as the Sierra Club have pushed for limiting plastic bags, she said, while the California Grocers' Association has been concerned but cooperative in finding compromises.

One local grocer said a bag ban might not sit well with some customers. "If more people want to be green, then that's wonderful," said Erik Forslund, the store manager at Zanotto's Downtown Market. "But a lot of people want the convenience of plastic bags."

And convenient they are, said Lee Kopp on Thursday, as he darted into Zanotto's for some sandwiches to feed a group of hungry dancers. The

publicist for Ballet San Jose said he tries to remember his cloth shopping bag, but those plastic bags sure come in handy for wrapping smelly garbage and using at picnics. He also fears a 25-cent fee would impact low-income people unfairly.

"I'm not a big believer in government solutions to things like this," Kopp added. "A public education program would be far more equitable."

Indeed, ill timing — not lobbying — may yet doom the fee proposal.

"The current economy presents us with a horrible time to impose a fee," said San Jose Councilman Sam Liccardo, who also sits on the county's recycling commission. "That ordinance should be passed, but it's not obvious to me it should be passed in the worst recession in modern history."

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