

Tim Grobaty: Bagging greener habits as plastic bows out

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A proposed ban on the distribution of single-use plastic bags by grocery stores is designed to encourage shoppers to utilize re-usable bags. (Ken Kwok/Press-Telegram)

A BRAND NEW BAG: Every so often we have had to make big changes in our life.

In the '80s, as the world began to tilt toward healthiness, we had to learn not to smoke cigarettes in hospital waiting rooms and in the produce section of the grocery store.

Later, our bank persuaded us that it would be in everyone's best interest if we'd figure out how to use an ATM and quit pestering the tellers.

A trip to the post-9/11 airport has become such a maze of interrogations, X-rays and body searches that we have taken to wearing a stylish aviation outfit that includes Sansabelt trousers and green rubber slip-on shoes. We look like a rather dull circus clown.

The next big adaptation we're going to have to grapple with is how we'll pick up after our dog.

For a dozen years, the weapon of choice in picking up after our dog, which we hope you'll read as code for something filthier and utterly upsetting on such a fine day as this, has been the plastic shopping bag, the rustling of which is sufficient to send our dog Jimmy hurtling through the house and into the outdoors with such eagerness and velocity as to leave a Jimmy-shaped hole in the solid oak front door.

Now comes the last week's passage of the California State Assembly bill 1998, co-authored by our own beloved Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal.

The bill, once passed by the Senate, as it's expected to be, and signed by the governor, as it's expected to be, will ban single-use plastic grocery bags from being dispensed at grocery stores beginning in 2012.

Stores will have to offer reusable bags for sale, or charge a minimum of five cents for recyclable paper bags.

For years, the powerful plastic-bag-making cartel has tried to police itself and ward off this apparently inevitable ban of its product by pouring money into awareness campaigns regarding the fact that these bags are recyclable.

And, sure, some semi-green types have gone through the small effort of bringing the bags back to the stores for recycling, or merely dumping them in their home recycling bin.

Others have reused them, and there are a million ways to do that, from dog-walking accessories to lunch sacks, storage devices, wastebasket liners and hobo bindles.

The problem, ultimately, comes from people who don't do the right thing with the bags. The environmental research group Worldwatch estimates that 100 billion plastic bags a year are handed over to consumers each year, and we can agree, can't we, that there aren't enough responsible or enviro-savvy people in the world to properly dispose of 100 billion bags. Or the 19 billion given out in California, or 552 per Californian.

The bags are, litter-ally, everywhere, wafting up like battered angels above the traffic on freeway, practically waterproofing the banks of rivers and streams worldwide, making giant, continent-sized trash isles in the middle of the ocean.

To date, no state has banned them - and our own state's effort has been met with the threadbare hoots of La-La Land and its wacky ban-craziness.

Some countries not always thought to be as modern or progressive as the United States - China and Bangladesh come to mind - have already taken steps to ban the bags, as have some U.S. cities. The names won't surprise you: San Francisco, Palo Alto, Malibu.

Yes, the generally well-to-do citizens of these cities can well afford to turn up their noses at the plastic bag - the hoi polloi's carryall, the great receptacle of the common man - the anti-ban assembly voters say. But what of the underclass, long the concern of Republicans such as Irvine assemblyman Chuck DeVore and others who claim that the bill is no friend of the poor, whose numbers may be strapped for the money that stores will charge for recyclable paper bags? (Actually, DeVore didn't say "strapped," he said "dumped under the bus.")

Well, we can always keep the 552 plastic bags we're issued each year, and we can continue to amass them over the balance of 2010 and all of 2011 and use those for future shopping. At least, we'll keep some in the car or purse against the inevitable times when we're stuck in a store without our battery of re-usable bags.

We have already taken lately to bringing reusable bags to the market when we think of it, and "think" is the operative word for now. For all those lapses - and at this point early in our re-education process, there are still many - we will collect the occasional plastic bags and carry them around as we follow Jimmy from yard to yard, and wonder what we'll do when we finally run out.

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