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City Council approves plastic shopping bag ban

JOHN STARK / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - The City Council voted 7-0 on Monday, July 11, to approve an ordinance that will ban most plastic shopping bags within the city.

The ordinance takes effect one year after it becomes law.

Council member Seth Fleetwood suggested the ordinance in March 2011, and since then, a citizen group dubbed Bag It Bellingham has been drumming up community support.

On Monday afternoon, it quickly became clear that the effort had been successful. The ordinance cleared the council's Natural Resources committee, chaired by Fleetwood, on a 4-0 vote.

Before taking their vote Monday night, the council heard from two retailers - Chuck Robinson of Village Books and Paper Dreams, and Terra Organica owner Stephen Trinkhaus. Both men said they had phased out plastic bags at their stores, and saved money for the business as a result.

Trinkhaus said a few of his customers missed the convenience of a disposable bag, but most were supportive, and quickly got used to bringing their own reusable bags to the store.

"Fewer and fewer people are forgetting their bags and fewer and fewer are complaining," Trinkhaus said.

Backers of the ban said plastic bags use up fossil fuels and find their way into the oceans, where they can harm birds, sea turtles and whales.

Besides banning the use of lightweight disposable plastic shopping bags, the ordinance would require retailers to charge customers five cents for each disposable paper bag they use.

The extra nickels are meant to help retailers cover the higher cost of the paper bags while giving shoppers an incentive to remember their reusable bags.

The seven-page ordinance contains a few complexities:

- Low-income people can be exempted from the nickel paper bag fee;
- A store can get a temporary exemption from the law that would be granted by the mayor, if that store can demonstrate a special hardship;
- Retailers at the Bellingham Farmers Market may distribute paper bags to their customers without charging the nickel fee;
- Paper bags provided to shoppers must be made from 40 percent recycled materials;
- Restaurants are permitted to offer disposable plastic bags for take-out foods.
- Small paper bags can be offered free to shoppers for small items.

At Monday's committee session, council member Bornemann praised Brooks Anderson and Jill MacIntyre Witt, leaders of Bag It Bellingham, for proposing the ordinance and undertaking a citywide public-education campaign since the ordinance was suggested in March. As a result of their efforts, Bornemann said, the initial backlash against the proposal died away and support grew, from retailers as well as shoppers.

"You went and did the work and headed that off," Bornemann said. "Thanks for doing it the right way."

Anderson replied that she was aware that the ordinance would need widespread support to be successful.

"We wanted this to be about all of Bellingham," Anderson said. "We really did work to get the buy-in."

Among other things, Bag It Bellingham volunteers collected more than 3,400 signatures in support of the ordinance and got expressions of support from associations in 16 of the city's 25 neighborhoods.

Knutson noted that Bellingham was a leader in moving to a citywide recycling system more than 20 years ago, and this was another example of Bellingham's leading role on environmental issues.

The bag ordinance gained some momentum in the past few days after two local supermarket firms, Haggen Food and Pharmacy and The Markets, said they favored the ordinance.

Mayor Dan Pike saluted the firms for speaking out.

"In many communities, the large retailers would be fighting this tooth and nail," he said.

After the committee meeting, Heather Trim of People for Puget Sound in Seattle said her group expects to launch a new effort to get a plastic bag ban in place in Seattle. An earlier ban that imposed a 20-cent paper bag fee that was revenue to the city proved unpopular and was defeated at the polls. Trim said she thinks a Bellingham-style measure could get the support of a majority of Seattle residents.

The Bellingham measure will charge just a nickel, and the revenue goes to the retailers, not to the city.

By waiting a year to phase in the ban, Anderson said Bellingham's law will give retailers plenty of time to use up bags they have purchased, while giving shoppers time to adjust their expectations.

She noted that retailers have been taking steps to encourage shoppers to carry reusable bags, because they want to eliminate the cost of providing shopping bags.

"If everybody gets on board with this thing, it's going to be a win-win-win," Anderson said.

That's not how they see it at Hilex Poly, a 1,300-employee company based in South Carolina that is the largest plastic shopping bag manufacturer in the U.S.

"There should be free choice in the marketplace," said Phil Rozenski, director of marketing and sustainability at Hilex. "We believe there should be alternatives in the marketplace for different lifestyles."

Rozenski said his company is also among the largest plastic bag recyclers, and Hilex products average 25 percent recycled material. He contended that discarded shopping bags are a minuscule part of litter and landfill waste, while reusable bags also use more resources and energy and will be thrown out at some point.

He also questioned the wisdom of imposing a nickel fee for use of paper bags, even if retailers keep the nickel.

"This money comes directly out of the grocery bill of the consumer," Rosenski said.

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