



Bag ban approved for 2010

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Critics may deride Fort McMurray as an environmental disaster zone, but the municipality proved it's not afraid of a little green legislation.

Last night, council unanimously passed a bylaw that will ban single-use shopping bags at most retailers within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, boasting that a more sweeping ban doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

After the bylaw comes into effect on Sept. 1, both disposable plastic and paper bags used to haul groceries and other purchases to their car will no longer be made available by the store. So when Christmas shopping at Wal-Mart next year or picking up groceries from any of the major stores in Fort McMurray as of next fall, shoppers will need to bring some reusable bags.

An exemption to the bylaw was included for liquor stores, pharmacies and restaurants, including fast food franchises.

Coun. John Vyboh said during the meeting there were a lot of good reasons to support the bylaw.

"We are showing not just the rest of the province or the country, but the world who we are," Vyboh said. "We are taking the first step in changing the image of this community and we're also sending a signal to the youth — they are the ones who inherit what we have done."

It was a full house in council chamber last night with some people forced to stand to view the meeting. The enthusiastic crowd broke into applause at several times throughout the meeting including, unsurprisingly, at the end when the ban was finally passed after nearly three hours of debate.

Seven people spoke in support of the bylaw while four people came out in opposition. In addition to those in attendance, 30 written submissions in support were sent to the municipality along with several letters sent to specific councillors on the issue.

Coun. Mike Allen proposed a motion of deferral on the amendment that would have held off the final vote on the ban until January 2011. However, after that motion was defeated Allen, ended up voting in favour of the ban.

"At the end of the day, I couldn't ignore the fact that it had gained such momentum and had such huge support throughout the community," Allen said. "My concerns are related to how we implement it and the reasonableness of what's being presented."

Those in opposition to the bylaw argued that the ban would have several negative consequences for both retailers and consumers. They said removing the single-use bags will inconvenience people forgetting to bring bags, while businesses will be hurt because customers will be pushed away from making impulse buys if they haven't brought enough bags.

Another argument brought up was the difficulty the ban will create for retailers in regards to shop lifting if people in a store are all carrying bags.

Colleen Tatum, a local small-business woman, presented a petition with 175 signatures of people in opposition to the ban.

Sean Graham, a local high school student who first proposed the idea for the ban, responded to Tatum's petition by pointing out that he had collected close to 2,300 signatures on a petition in support of the ban in a shorter amount of time.

Graham said he was very impressed with council for their unanimous vote.

"It feels fantastic," Graham said. "It feels good to be able to start something and convince an entire city to do a course of action, and I think this is a very simple thing we can do to improve our ecological footprint in this community and I'm hoping they look at this as a starting point and say, "What can we do next now?"

From the first time the bylaw was proposed, those in support have pointed to the environmental benefits they say a bag ban would have. They argued it will reduce waste going to the landfill while reducing litter and harmful toxins that could get into the food supply.

Coun. Allen said that he would prefer that the municipality educate people to the right course of action rather than legislating their behaviour.

"There is no other community in the world that has done this this," Allen said. "It will send a message out. We will have some that are hugely in support (and) others that are opposed."

Mayor Melissa Blake said she was conflicted on what action to take through the bylaw process, but eventually supported the ban.

"We are trying to make a change, we are trying to be a sustainable community," Blake said. "Council has talked about other objectives and when we get to 2011 we'll have a curb-side recycling pickup as well these are all progressive measures towards the better end result of sustainability," Blake said.

The Single-Use Plastic Shopping Bag Bylaw unanimously passed its final reading with Blake and councillors Sheldon Germain, Phil Meagher, Sharon Clarkson, Mila Byron, Sonny Flett, David Blair, Renee Rebus, Vyboh and Allen in support. Coun. Gordon Janvier was not in attendance at last night's meeting.

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