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San Francisco might expand plastic-bag ban

Wanting to do it the San Francisco way, the city isn't waiting for a similar state measure before possibly broadening its current ban to apply to all retailers and adding a nickel fee for paper bags.

By Maria L. La Ganga, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from San Francisco

When San Francisco became the first city in the country to ban plastic bags at big grocery and drug stores, it ignited a fierce debate over just what local governments can do to keep the ubiquitous "urban tumbleweed" out of tree limbs and landfills.

Now officials here in the City That Knows How want to expand that prohibition — which prompted inquiries from like-minded governments in 40 states and 33 countries when it passed three years ago — by outlawing non-recyclable plastic bags at all retailers of all sizes.

Under the proposed ordinance, introduced Tuesday at the Board of Supervisors meeting, you could still pack your organic arugula or bulk raw almonds in plastic produce bags. And dry cleaners could still swath clean garments in clingy, see-through film to protect them from the elements.

Beyond that, though, forget about it. And get ready to pony up a nickel a bag for paper sacks, too, if the measure passes.

Although a statewide ban on plastic bags at big drug and grocery stores — and a similar charge for paper — is working its way through the Legislature, officials here are moving forward anyway because they don't believe the California measure goes far enough.

The state law, which passed in the Assembly and is now in the Senate Appropriations Committee, would keep local governments from weighing in with their own plastic bag measures through so-called preemption language.

The state law "will co-opt the ability of local governments wanting to strengthen these laws later on," said Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi as he introduced the ordinance. "This is why we are trying to lead by enacting municipally and why other cities are also moving in a similar direction as well."

The strengthened San Francisco ordinance would go into effect March 1.

So far, merchant reaction has been muted. The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce declined to comment, because its members have yet to see the ordinance. Stephen H. Adams, president of the

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Merchants of Upper Market and Castro, said most of his organization's members have already switched to paper bags.

Even though paper is costlier than plastic, Brownies Hardware switched shortly after the original San Francisco ordinance passed in 2007. "It's the right thing to do," said Stephen Cornell, owner of the 105-year-old store in the Nob Hill neighborhood. "I wasn't the only one. You can go to about five or six hardware stores in San Francisco that I know of that did the same thing."

But plastic bag makers are up in arms. Shari Jackson is director of Progressive Bag Affiliates, a division of the American Chemistry Council. Her organization decries San Francisco's move as "just not a good policy approach."

Banning plastic bags "leads consumers to switch to paper bags, and they have a heavier environmental impact," Jackson said. "They take 70% more energy to manufacture. They produce 50% more greenhouse gas emissions."

If the ordinance passes, San Francisco would be the first city in California to have such a tough law on the books, and the second area in the country, according to Jackson.

In June, the North Carolina legislature banned one-use plastic bags at all retailers in three counties of the environmentally sensitive Outer Banks region. The law, which takes effect Oct. 1, expands on an earlier ban on the use of plastic bags at large stores.

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