

Berkeley considers banning plastic grocery bags

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BERKELEY — The question "paper or plastic?" may soon be a thing of the past in Berkeley.

The city that was the first in the state to ban Styrofoam coffee cups and takeout containers in businesses and the first in the nation to convert its entire fleet of diesel vehicles to biodiesel is considering banning plastic grocery bags.

On Tuesday, the item from Mayor Tom Bates will come before the City Council, which likely will ship it to the city's Zero Waste Commission for several months of study.

In March, San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a landmark ordinance banning the use of plastic bags at grocery stores and chain drug stores generating more than \$2 million in annual sales.

The law will go into effect later this year when stores will be required to offer compostable plastic bags, paper bags or reusable bags. Los Angeles and Santa Cruz are also considering a ban on plastic bags.

"I would have liked to be first, but I don't want to be third," Bates said. "We want to get it back from the Zero Waste Commission and make sure we have a full airing of the ordinance. I will be listening to everybody. We want to be smart about it."

That will mean he'll be hearing from the California Grocers Association, which represents 6,000 retail stores in the state and is against such a ban, spokesman Dave Heylen said.

"Our position is we think that a more effective way of dealing with the waste issue is to reuse, reduce and recycle," Heylen said. "We think that could make a significant impact on the type of waste going into the waste stream."

Compostable bags are most expensive, Heylen said. Compostable plastic bags cost between 6 and 10 cents each while traditional plastic bags cost 1 or 2 cents each.

"In a business where you have a 1 to 3 percent profit margin, there isn't a lot of room to absorb costs," he said. "We do not think this will be the most effective way of dealing with this waste issue."

Heylen said recycling plastic bags will become more difficult and costly because recyclers will have to sort out the plastic from the compostable bags.

A statewide law that goes into effect this summer requires all grocery stores to give customers a place to recycle plastic bags. The grocers' association also plans to educate its workers on how to more efficiently bag groceries and its customers on recycling them.

Bates said the city polled several thousand people on the issue last year with mixed results. "Half liked it and half didn't," he said.

Shoppers at Berkeley Bowl this week had mixed reactions.

"We can't just keep digging holes in the ground for these," said Darrell Adams, leaving Berkeley Bowl with groceries in plastic bags. "The stuff backs up. The stores have to take charge on this."

Noori Dehbahani, a Berkeley Bowl shopper who had his groceries in plastic bags, said he likes to use the plastic bags as garbage bags at home.

Berkeley leaders believe the ban could help in its effort to meet waste reduction goals. Under a voter mandate, 75 percent of waste must be diverted from landfills by 2010 with the goal of zero waste by 2020.

What's more, banning the bags also could benefit the city's greenhouse gas reduction plan because using compostable bags would reduce the amount of energy it takes to recycle the bags, Bates said.

In November, 81 percent of Berkeley voters approved the measure to spend to drastically slash greenhouse gases. The city hopes to trim greenhouse gases by at least 25 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050.

MediaNews staff writer Doug Oakley contributed to this report.

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