LA Council Moves to Ban Plastic Bags

the Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Los Angeles is becoming the nation's largest city to ban plastic bags at grocery stores in an increasingly widespread move to conserve the environment.

The City Council voted 13-1 Wednesday to approve a policy that would ban single-use plastic bags later this year after an environmental impact report is completed and an ordinance is adopted.

The program would be modeled after bag bans in 48 other California cities that aim to prod consumers into using reusable bags in order to prevent plastic litter that clogs waterways, swells landfills and clutters streets.

After the ordinance is adopted, the city will require large stores to phase out plastic bags over six months, then provide free paper bags for another six months. Small retailers would have a year to phase out plastic.

After a year, retailers would be allowed to charge 10 cents for paper bags. Residents receiving government assistance would be exempt from the bag fee.

Los Angeles, with nearly 4 million residents, will be the nation's largest city to ban carry-out plastic bags, said Enrique Zaldivar, director of the city's Bureau of Sanitation. The city uses 2.7 billion single-use bags a year.

"It's important to conserve the environment. The reusable bag will do that," Zaldivar said.

The vote came after a lengthy public hearing in a standing-room-only council chamber. Activists presented recyclable bags holding thousands of petition signatures in support of a ban. One wore an outfit of plastic bags.

"Veep" and "Seinfeld" actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus, a board member of environmental group Heal the Bay, said it was vital for the city to ban plastic bags.

"I have a quiz for everyone to take today," she said.

"What is hideously ugly, gigantically dangerous and outrageously expensive, and yet we still use it every single day in Los Angeles? No, it is not the 405 (freeway), it is plastic bags," she said, holding one up. "And unlike most other ugly, dangerous and expensive things, we can get rid of these things overnight."

A large percentage of ocean pollution is plastic, she said, and that pollution damages ocean life and the jobs that depend on it.

The ban was opposed by lobbyists for manufacturers and union employees who produce the ubiquitous bags and argued that a ban could cost several hundred local jobs.

Several dozen plastic bag industry workers in purple and blue -shirts told the council that their livelihood depends on the bag industry.

"Don't send my job to China," said Norma Fierro, an employee at bag-maker Crown Poly who held up a Chinese-made reusable bag. "Please save my job."

Others argued that the bags' impact on the environment was being overstated and that a ban would force consumers to buy paper and reusable bags that will wind up in landfills anyway.

Many stores already sell reusable plastic and cloth bags for a dollar or two, said Cathy Browne, general manager of Crown Poly. "The city council does not need to mandate consumer behavior," she said. "Let the market dictate consumer choice."

The city's bag policy is partially based on a Los Angeles County law enacted in November 2010 that covers about 1 million people in unincorporated county areas. County officials have estimated the ban has reduced the use of single-use plastic bags by 94 percent.

In February, San Francisco extended its plastic bag ban on large grocery stores and pharmacies to restaurants and smaller retailers. Santa Cruz County enacted a plastic ban bag last September.

Last year, the California Supreme Court ruled that the Southern California city of Manhattan Beach could enforce its 2008 ban without going through a lengthy environmental study. An industry group had sued to overturn the ordinance, arguing that paper bags have a greater negative effect on the environment than plastic bags.

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