



## Recyclers confront plastic bag bans

By Mark Henricks

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Plastic bag manufacturers are battling a growing movement to ban or tax single-use bags, like those employed to carry groceries, by expanding recycling efforts for plastic films. But the issue remains controversial as cities try to meet goals for reducing litter and divert materials from landfill.

Austin, Texas, is one of the latest cities to consider a ban on plastic bags. City leaders have proposed to require retailers beginning in 2013 to collect a surcharge of \$.10 per bag or \$1 per transaction from customers, and to completely ban single-use bags, whether paper or plastic, the following year.

“Single use bags litter the city and waterways, are unsightly in natural areas, and cause significant expense to local governments in litter control and disposal,” said Bob Gedert, director of Austin Resource Recovery, formerly the City of Austin Solid Waste Services. “In addition, our Zero Waste Plan requires moving away from single use to reuse and recyclability standards.”

Several cities, starting with San Francisco in 2007, have moved to tax or ban single use plastic bags. The bans have reduced plastic bag litter in at least some cases, says Anne Bedarf, senior manager with GreenBlue’s Sustainable Packaging Coalition, a non-profit industry working group based in Charlottesville, Virginia. However, critics say bans are not the best solution, and that recycling is better.

Paper bags are equally costly in terms of resource consumption during manufacturing, noted H. Sterling Burnett, senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis in Dallas. And reusable bags, which the bans are trying to promote, don’t last forever and are not always recyclable. Also, shoppers haven’t embraced reusable bags. Burnett said that the United States imports about 500 million reusable bags every year. “That means people are not taking their bags back in and they have to get a new one every time,” he said.

Single use plastic bags, Burnett said, are often re-used as storage, garbage and other containers. The bags also take up little space in landfills. “It turns out they don’t make up by weight or number very much of the litter on the road,” Burnett adds. “It’s less than 0.6 percent.”

One alternative to banning plastic bags is to recycle them. Grocery and other plastic film such as dry cleaning bags, department store bags and shrink wrap can be cleaned, shredded, pelletized and manufactured into composite lumber, its most popular use, said Mark Daniels, vice president for sustainability and environmental policy at Hilex Poly Co. LLC, a major film manufacturer in South Carolina, and chairman of the American Progressive Bag Affiliates, an industry group devoted to encouraging recycling.

Daniels indicated that recycling rates for plastic bags, film and wraps increased 24 percent from 2005 to 2009. “It’s one of the fastest growing and more valuable recycling products out there,” he said. “And we think there is room to increase recycling rates.”

However, the bags tend to become tangled in machinery at materials recovery facilities, causing costly downtime and repairs. Furthermore, efforts to encourage consumers to recycle have limited success. Starting in 2009, Austin tried to reduce the number of bags being sent to its landfill by 50 percent, but after 3 years the use of plastic bags had only declined 20 percent, the city said.

If recycling of post-consumer plastic film has been challenging to date, opponents of bans argue that taxing or banning bags will make it much more difficult. That’s because grocery stores and other locations that, today, have approximately 30,000 bins for collecting recycled bags, will presumably stop collecting the bags since they are no longer allowed to hand them out.

Recycling advocates suggest, instead of banning bags, making it easier for consumer to recycle bags and for recyclers to handle them. One approach is to require consumers to place plastic bags and other film inside another plastic bag before putting them into a single stream recycling container.

This is more convenient for consumers than having to make a trip to a collection bin. It’s also easier for MRFs to handle the otherwise troublesome plastic film at recycling centers. This is the approach used successfully in Arlington, Virginia, noted Bedarf. However, she said only approximately 10 percent of United States households have access to similar plastic bag-friendly single stream recycling systems.

Daniels said the technology to recycle bags in single stream facilities is available and becoming more widely used. He and his association members are determined to attempt to block bag bans wherever they crop up. He noted that no state, so far, has moved to ban or tax bags. Gedert, however, says the bans envisioned in Austin and enacted in San Francisco and other cities are just the beginning. “I foresee a national ban on single use plastic bags, as it creates a financial burden on local and state governments,” he said. “Why should the government bear the cost of a polluting product?”

Bedarf said the Sustainable Packaging Coalition doesn’t anticipate a national ban or even statewide bans. As an alternative, her group is promoting a new labeling plan for plastic bags and films that advises consumers bags can be dropped off for recycling at the store where they were obtained or other retail locations. “Certainly, the goal should be to recycle as many as possible,” she said, “since it looks like they’re going to continue to be used.”

Indeed, **Burnett** said that in cities such as Brownsville, Texas, where a surcharge was instituted, consumers tended to pay the surcharges in order to keep using single-use bags rather than substituting re-usable bags. The reason, he said, is that consumers prefer single use plastic bags because they work better than the alternatives of paper and re-usable bags. The reason they don’t recycle them is that, so far, it’s not that easy to do. “Plastic bags are used because of convenience,” he said, “and they’ll be recycled more as it becomes more convenient.”