

## Other voices: Plastic bag bans hold hidden costs

By H. Sterling Burnett

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More than two dozen cities nationwide have either banned plastic grocery bags -- in some cases even paper bags -- entirely or have imposed a fee for using them in order to encourage the use of reusable bags. Other cities are considering similar action. However, such policies have hidden costs that are virtually ignored.

Consumers like choice and most choose plastic bags for their convenience, strength and options for multiple uses. As a result, anecdotal evidence indicates that cities with bag bans have lost commerce, while surrounding cities and neighborhoods benefit from shoppers who choose to go elsewhere.

Contrary to the myth propagated by environmental lobbyists and other plastic bag opponents, plastic bags are rarely single-use items. Rather, long after plastic bags transport the groceries, people find a variety of ways to reuse them. They are used as lunch bags, car litter bags, to line bathroom trash bins, to collect dog waste and to seal soiled diapers. Other uses include carrying donation items to goodwill, transporting laundry to the cleaners and securing items in the garage and attic. Some people carry bags on walks to pick up stray trash.

Without them, we will likely buy more trash bags and baggies to compensate. In stores that ban plastic grocery bags, shoppers have become creative, using thin plastic bags from the fresh vegetable sections of stores to carry out groceries -- double- and triple-lining them to make them work. Now that's a waste nightmare and a sheer waste of resources.

As to plastic bag recycling, it is on the rise.

A number of major retailers have set up recycling boxes at the entrances of their stores to encourage recycling. Indeed, plastic bag recovery has increased by 31% since 2005. This growth is more than nine times greater than the 3.4% increase in recovery of all municipal solid waste from 2005 to 2009, according to U.S. EPA data. Recovery of post-consumer film, which includes plastic bags and product wraps, grew to an estimated 854 million pounds in 2009. Bag bans will reduce the motivation for those recycling efforts.

Another economic drawback? The largest manufacturer of reusable bags is China, while thousands of U.S. workers are employed manufacturing plastic bags in the U.S. Thus, cities that support bag bans are handing China control of yet another industry while threatening jobs at home.

Reusable bags present a health challenge. When used to carry meats, poultry or fish, blood and

other fluids can soak into the material. If not cleaned regularly and stored properly, bacteria, including e-coli, can take up residence and mold can form. Continued use can contaminate the users' own food and even the food of others, as the contaminated reusable bags come into contact with grocery carts and conveyor belts.

Indeed, several instances of illness have already been linked to reusable bags. It's true that reusable bags can be washed, but doing so shortens their useful life considerably. Dirty and worn reusable bags then make their way to the landfill.

Sadly, too much of the push to ban plastic bags is based on false or misreported data.

For example, bag ban proponents in Austin, Texas, say that plastic bags make up a large portion of the litter on roadways. Bob Gedert, director of city department Austin Resource Recovery, testified before the City Council that a recent study, "Litter in America," found that plastic bags comprise 2.2% of the city's litter.

However, a co-author of the study responded in writing to clarify that his study never said that. Rather, plastic bag litter comprises only 0.6% of litter volume. Even the 0.6% figure is high, since it includes other types of plastic waste, such as industrial wrapping, dry cleaner and trash bags. Indeed, the national 2009 Keep America Beautiful study does not even include plastic bags in its top 10 for sources of litter.

Plastic bags are a minor part of our larger waste problems.

Every city that bans plastic bags costs shoppers, businesses, city government and workers across the nation, with little or no benefit for the environment. Unfortunately, bad data results in bad policy.

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