



Editorial: Irvine may succumb to bag-ban fever

By:

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Irvine may be the next Orange County city to use plastic grocery bags as a scapegoat for local environmental concerns. City leaders are weighing whether to follow the lead of Laguna Beach and Huntington Beach in imposing such an invasive and overreaching policy decree as a bag ban.

The Irvine City Council voted 4-1 on Aug. 14 to direct city staff to study a potential ban of plastic grocery bags. Councilman Jeff Lalloway cast the dissenting vote. Apparently, termed-out Mayor Sukhee Kang, a Democratic candidate for Congress, is pushing the bag ban to deal with, as he termed it, "harmful impacts of widespread use of plastic grocery shopping bags."

We've editorialized repeatedly against having government insert itself in what should be a decision made by the consumer and the marketplace. Such bans, which often have included mandatory charges for paper bags, are becoming a trend, especially among municipalities along or near the coast.

Not only do bag bans amount to overreach by local government and create a precedent for local officials to enact freedom-infringing edicts on little more than feel-good environmentalism, but little evidence exists to that shows such polices would improve the environment.

Before proceeding further, the Irvine council ought to answer the following questions: Is there sufficient evidence to suggest plastic bags actually have a significant impact on the environment compared with so-called reusable bags? Is it the role of local government to legislate personal behaviors and purchasing options? What will the economic repercussions be of such a policy? Are there health implications?

For example, San Francisco, which instituted a bag ban on larger retailers in 2007, opted not to pursue a similar ban on smaller retailers because it would have negative economic consequences, as Assemblywoman Diane Harkey, R-Laguna Niguel, pointed out this year in an opinion column for the Register.

Also, there is some dissent as to how harmful single-use plastic bags are for the environment compared with reusable bags and paper bags. California State University chemical engineer Joseph Greene told the Wall Street Journal that reusable bags had to be used nine times before they had a positive environmental impact compared with single-use plastic bags.

Sterling Burnett, a senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis, said plastic bags "use less energy than reusable bags" and paper bags. He also said plastic bags are healthier than reusable bags,

which store bacteria and pass them on when the bags are brought back into stores, placed in shopping carts or on checkout stand conveyor belts.

Mr. Lalloway told us that he opposes a ban because "plastic bags are reused for a variety of other purposes. For example, I use them to pick up waste to pick up after my dogs; restaurants use them for take out and other people use them for other reasons," he said. "The unintended consequences of banning bags has not been fully contemplated by this council."

Irvine should opt against following this regulatory fad.