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Austin would be ill-advised to ban plastic bags

By H. Sterling Burnett

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The Austin City Council is about to make a huge mistake that will cost Austinites for years to come with the upcoming vote to ban the use of plastic bags. It's a clear case of using bad data to make bad policy.

More than two dozen cities nationwide, including a few in Texas, have either banned plastic grocery bags (and in some cases paper bags) entirely, or seek to encourage the use of reusable bags by charging fees for plastic grocery bags. Austin is the largest city in Texas to consider such a ban, with the city council slated to vote on a plan today.

Austin's ban would be one of the broadest in the nation, applying to all so-called single-use bags, paper or plastic, from all retailers. It would allow retailers to offer reusable bags, defined as those made of cloth or durable materials, and thicker paper and plastic bags with some recycled content. The plan under consideration could begin the ban sometime in 2013. The plan would charge a fee for bags used in the interim until the full ban takes effect of either 10 cents per bag used or a flat \$1.00 per visit (like Brownsville charges). Some have also suggested including paper bags in the fee and ban plan.

Bag ban proponents give a number of reasons for their support, the most common being that single-use bags are used only once and that they make up a large portion of landfill content and litter on roadways. Austin City Council members seem to have been particularly influenced by a presentation from Bob Gedert, director of Austin Resource Recovery, in which he stated that plastic bags comprise 2.2 percent of the city's litter.

There's just one problem: That figure is dead wrong. In fact, it exaggerates the percentage of litter made of plastic bags by 366 percent. Who says so? The study's author.

Recognizing that his data was being misused, the study's lead author, Steven Stein, asked Gedert to make a correction. What Stein's research actually found was that plastic bag litter comprised only 0.6 percent of litter volume, not the 2.2 percent claimed by Gedert. Even the 0.6 percent figure is high because it includes other types of plastic waste, such as industrial wrapping and dry cleaner and trash bags. Because Gedert overstated the amount of plastic bag litter, he also grossly overstated the dollars saved by banning plastic bags. Indeed, the 2009 Keep America Beautiful study does not include plastic bags in its top 10 sources of litter.

The nationwide frenzy to ban plastic bags comes with hidden costs that virtually no one is reporting.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that bag bans result in lost commerce in the cities where they're enacted, while surrounding cities and neighborhoods benefit as shoppers vote with their feet. Retailers in cities adjoining Austin will likely benefit if the ban goes into effect, while retailers in Austin will see lost sales and the city will lose tax revenue.

This is consumer choice — most people, even in Austin, prefer the plastic bag option for all the obvious reasons.

Also, many plastic bags are, in fact, not just used once. At home, plastic bags are used for collecting trash, animal waste, diapers and more. They are used to carry donations and dry cleaning and for storage. Will we buy more baggies and trash bags to fill these gaps?

In addition, increasingly, plastic bags are being recycled. In Austin, a growing number of retailers are making an organized effort to recycle used plastic bags.

The reusable bags that Austin's government is pushing as an alternative have a significant economic downside. Plastic bags are made in the U.S., and the industry employs thousands of workers. By contrast, China dominates reusable bag manufacturing. This puts Austin and other cities banning plastic bags in the position of putting American workers in the unemployment line while helping China take over one more industry.

Environmental advocates often argue that government should follow the science. In this case, the science shows that plastic bags are not a substantive litter problem. Accordingly, the drawbacks to banning bags far outweigh the benefits of controlling a miniscule percent of litter.

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