Bag Bans: Trading One Problem For Another

PLASTIC BAG BANS ARE INEFFECTIVE AND END UP TRADING ONE PROBLEM FOR ANOTHER

By Anthony van Leeuwen, 20 February 2014

Officials in many communities across California and the Nation have implemented bans on the distribution of plastic carryout bags at selected retailers including a fee on paper bags. The fee on paper bags is imposed for no other reason than to coerce shoppers to switch to using reusable bags. The reason most often given by these officials is the litter and aesthetic problem posed by plastic carryout bags and the harm caused to marine and terrestrial environments including wildlife.

These officials, have unfortunately, succumbed to political correctness and the self-interest of being seen as "green" and supportive of the environment. However, instead of due diligence to carefully evaluate alternative solutions, officials adopt the same populist prescription implemented by other communities. (van Leeuwen & Williams, Bag Bans Officials Neglect Homework, 2013)

Although Bag Ban Proponents are passionate about their zeal to protect the environment, their ideas are generally disconnected from reality and their solutions don't work and are unrealistic. (Berezow & Campbell, 2012) Nowhere is this more aptly illustrated than in the communities of San Jose and Santa Monica where bag usage surveys reveal that shoppers opt for paper bags or no bags over reusable bags by a ratio of two-to-one. In other words, the majority of shoppers reject using reusable bags. (van Leeuwen & Williams, Bag Bans: A Failure - Not Success As Claimed, 2013)

Because officials do not carefully evaluate the litter impact of plastic carryout bags compared to the impact that a plastic bag ban will have on their citizens, officials have unwittingly traded one problem for another. In other words, the bag ban doesn't really solve a problem, it only shifts the problem from one area to another. What is worse, a plastic bag litter problem which has no impact in your personal life, now after a bag ban presents a series of challenges, in your face, each and every time you go shopping. (Williams & van Leeuwen, 2014)

Plastic Carryout Bag Litter Problem

The problem with lightweight plastic carryout bags is that a small quantity of the bags used in the community escape into the environment as litter. The number of plastic carryout bags that end up as litter has never been quantified. However, we do know that the proportion of plastic carryout bags in roadside litter is much less than the 0.6% which is attributed to "all plastic bags". (Stein, 2012)

Plastic bag litter is manifested in a number of different ways including the following:

- Some of the littered Plastic Carryout bags end up as road side litter.
- Some of the littered Plastic Carryout bags become windblown litter and get caught on trees, shrubs, and fences and represent an aesthetics problem.

- Some of the littered plastic bags run down storm drains and may end up in creeks, rivers, and into the ocean, if trash capture devices are not installed in storm drain inlets or outfalls.
- Some of the plastic bags end up in rivers and marine and coastal environments as a result of wind-blown litter.
- Some littered plastic bags may result in harm caused to marine and terrestrial wildlife.

It should be noted that banning plastic carryout bags will NOT prevent harm to wildlife! Other plastic debris floats and finds its way to the ocean where it is ingested by marine wildlife. Rather than banning a single item from the litter stream a rigorous and comprehensive litter removal strategy is required instead. (van Leeuwen, Why Not To Ban Plastic Carry Out Bags, 2012, p. 4)

It is true, that banning thin film plastic carryout bags will result in fewer plastic carryout bags in roadside litter. Unfortunately, since plastic carryout bags represent less than 0.6% of all roadside litter, the bag ban really does nothing to solve the roadside litter problem where as much as 29.1% is from fast food waste! In other words, the other 99.4% is still there waiting to be picked up! (van Leeuwen, Bag Bans: Wrong Way To Control Litter, 2013)

Problems Caused by Plastic Carryout Bag Bans

When a plastic carryout bag ban is implemented in the community, the community and residents encounter a series of new challenges or problems that have to be dealt with. Plastic Bag Bans result in higher financial costs to citizens, increased time and effort to comply, higher retail costs, increased exposure to health hazards, and a greater detrimental impact to the environment.

Higher Financial Cost To Citizens

A bag ban imposes increased financial costs on residents through the higher cost associated with paper bag fees and the purchase and replacement of reusable bags. In addition, shoppers who use reusable bags will encounter higher utility bills due to increased water, natural gas, and electricity consumption as a direct result of washing and sanitizing reusable bags, not to mention the cost of bleach or soap. Shoppers, who forget bags or do spur-of-the-moment shopping may make otherwise unnecessary trips home to pick up reusable bags, thereby increasing gas consumption and wear and tear on the car. Also, consumers face the added cost of buying plastic bags to use for small waste basket liners, trash bags, dispose of pet litter, etc. (van Leeuwen & Williams, Plastic Bag Alternatives Much More Costly to Consumers, 2013)

Increased Time And Effort To Comply With The Bag Ban

A plastic carryout bag ban also impacts shoppers directly by increasing the time and effort expended to wash and sanitize reusable bags on a regular basis, as well as, to manage reusable bags including inspecting, refolding, and put bags into the car or other storage location. In addition, shoppers who forget bags may make an unnecessary trips home to retrieve forgotten bags. Shoppers who are in line at the checkout counter and realized they left their bags in the car may elect to hold up the line by quickly retrieving bags from the car. (Williams & van Leeuwen, 2014)

Higher Retail Prices

The plastic bag ban and the increased use of reusable bags will result in higher shoplifting rates not only of food items but also taxable items like liquor. (McNerthey, 2013) In addition, retail prices will go up due to the requirement by stores to provide an exemption to paper bag fees for participants in the California Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) also known as the Food Stamp program. WIC and SNAP participants will be eligible to receive "free" paper bags while all other must pay. (van Leeuwen, Plastic Bag Ban Creates New Welfare Benefit, 2013) In addition, because reusable bags come in different sizes and are made from different materials they are much more difficult to fill, and will slow check stand lines, decrease worker productivity, which will more than likely lead to higher prices. (Ruark, 2011)

Increased Exposure To Health Hazards By Shoppers And Store Clerks

A plastic bag ban and the use of reusable bags exposes both shoppers and store clerks to health hazards. These health hazards include the risk of foodborne illness and disease transmission if reusable bags are not washed or sanitized on a regular basis. In addition, using reusable bags during influenza epidemics could help to spread the disease since the virus can be communicated via inanimate objects. (Racaniello, 2009) (Gerba, Williams, & Sinclair, 2010) Also, reusable bags tend to hold more than the thin film plastic carryout bags and are heavier to carry and manage and represent an ergonomic health hazard to children, the elderly, the handicapped, and those who have back problems who must take special care in filling these bags to avoid the risk injury. (van Leeuwen, Reusable Bags and Ergonomic Issues, 2013)

Greater Detrimental Impact To The Environment

A plastic bag ban has a detrimental impact to the environment. It turn out that plastic carryout bags have a much lower environmental impact than either paper or reusable bags. The greater weight and volume of material from which paper bags and reusable bags are made results in a corresponding higher amount of material disposed of in landfills than the plastic bags which they replace. (van Leeuwen, California Landfills Impacted By Bag Bans, 2014) In addition, paper bags consume more water and energy during the production of paper and cotton reusable bags consume more water and fertilizer and insecticides during the growing of cotton. (van Leeuwen, Plastic Bags - Greener Than Alternatives, 2014) In addition, a plastic bag ban results in an increase in water, natural gas, and electricity consumption due to the recurring nature of having to wash and sanitize reusable bags. (Shackford, 2014) In addition, a plastic bag ban results in the manufacture and sale, including the associated environmental impact, of replacement plastic bags for use in small waste baskets, as trash bags, to pick up pet litter, etc.

Related Issues

Bag Ban Proponents, in their frenzy to implement a bag ban, never fail to mention the low recycling rate of plastic carryout bags (less than 5%) as a reason to ban plastic bags. However, they fail to realize that the low recycling rate is directly related to the high reuse rate of plastic carryout bags! In fact, the plastic carryout bag is one of the most reused items that comes into the home. We all know that plastic

carryout bags, with their built-in handles are particularly good as waste bin liners, and trash bags, and used for dirty diapers, pet litter, wet clothes, etc. Most of these bags end up in the landfill containing trash which is beneficial to the environment in preventing the manufacture and sale of another plastic bag. (van Leeuwen, Plastic Bag Recycling Rate - A Non-Issue, 2013)

Paper bags enjoy a much higher recycling rate than plastic bags for good reason, consumers have fewer secondary uses for paper bags and storage of paper bags requires more space. One of the reasons is that when paper bags become wet, they disintegrate and fall apart spilling the contents on the ground. Hence, secondary use of paper bags is very limited.

Conclusion

From the above paragraphs, we can see that Bag Bans do not solve the litter problem nor the problem of harm to wildlife by plastic debris. Rigorous and comprehensive solutions to investigate and address litter problems should be pursued instead of banning a single item from the litter stream that produces miniscule results but creates a large and unnecessary burden and nuisance to shoppers.

As we have shown, the miniscule problem of plastic bag litter has been replaced or traded for other problems: higher carryout bags costs, increased time and effort to manage reusable bags, increased retail prices, greater exposure to health hazards, and a greater environmental impact.

So while bag ban Proponents solve one problem, they create a whole host of other problems. To make matters worse, the plastic bag litter problem does not affect residents in their personal life, the plastic bag ban will create, in your face, problems that affect all community residents. Residents who will now have to pay for paper bags, use reusable bags, or choose to use no bags. If residents choose to use reusable bags they will have to put up with all the hassles associated with bag management including washing and sanitizing of reusable bags. Even residents who pay for paper bags or who choose not to use reusable bags are inconvenienced every time they shop. (Williams & van Leeuwen, 2014) Clearly this shows that a plastic bag ban is the wrong solution to a plastic bag litter problem.

About The Author

Anthony van Leeuwen *is the founder of the* Fight The Plastic Bag Ban *website and writes extensively on the subject. He holds a bachelors and Master's degree in Electronics Engineering and has over 40 years of experience working in the federal government.*

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