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Council Considers Plastic Bags

By Cathy Tyson

Should the city of Lafayette ban plastic bags? Good question, but no answer at this time as the city council weighs pros and cons. After a thorough presentation by the Environmental Task Force recently, several key questions still lingered. Task force member Dick Holt suggested a phased in approach and said, "The time has come."

At issue is attempting to adjust consumer behavior by charging a small fee for paper bags in order to encourage the use of cloth or recyclable bags. If adopted, and that's a big if at this point, Lafayette would be joining 37 Bay Area cities and neighboring counties that include Marin, San Francisco, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz, and other cities up and down the state from Ukiah to Dana Point that restrict single-use bags. Although the number varies depending on the source, government source Cal Recycle 911 estimates only 3 percent of single use plastic bags were recycled in 2009; the rest end up in landfills or as litter.

It seems like the clear trend is toward banning disposable plastic bags. If adopted, Lafayette would be the first city in Contra Costa County to do so.

Supporters point out that single-use disposable bags pollute the environment, ultimately contribute to climate change and are costly to taxpayers.

Comments at the meeting represented a variety of viewpoints. Steve Richard, president of Sustainable Lafayette, noted there are discounts at major retailers already but that voluntary effort hasn't made a substantial dent in bag behavior. One resident wrote to the city council concerned about bag bacteria and losing freedoms. Longtime resident Joan Bruzzone stated, "I object to the legislature governing behavior."

Jay Lifson of the Chamber of Commerce spoke up to make clear the chamber had no position at this time, but the group had engaged in thought provoking discussions. However, he did speak to stores, including Safeway, that would not oppose the ordinance if adopted.

Council member Don Tatzin questioned whether Lafayette is responsible to enforce bag ordinance rules and if so, what would be the cost? Staff time to pursue the issue was another concern-he noted several items that were put on hold while the downtown specific plan was being addressed that might have to be delayed again.

"We can't legislate that people wash them," said council member Traci Reilly who is concerned about food-borne illness.

Perhaps the ultimate answer lies in Sacramento; currently AB 158 and SB 405 are working their way through the state legislature and would create statewide regulations rather than the patchwork situation that exists now. The bills would establish a ban on single-use plastic carryout bags at supermarkets, pharmacies and convenience stores throughout the state. In the meantime, the discussion on the bag ban issue was continued by the city council until May 13.

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