

Viewpoints: Should plastic bags be banned in California? No

Prohibition is a solution in search of a problem

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Growing up in the shadow of the '60s, a remarkable event occurred in my otherwise unremarkable hometown of Modesto – a little group called Ecology Action created the nation's first-ever curbside recycling program.

National coverage in *Look* magazine stoked town pride. The year was 1971, and I was 11 years old. I remember the excitement helping mom drag recyclables to the curb and watching primitive trucks pull into the cul-de-sac to haul everything away.

The experience left an indelible mark on me, as did coming of age with Earth Day. I've carried this environmental sensibility into adulthood. It's influenced how our household operates and how I raise my children. We often ride bikes to the store, try to remember reusable bags and buy from local farmers. Our recycling bin overflows.

So why would a lifelong common-sense environmentalist oppose a plastic bag ban? It starts with an open mind. A few years ago when I was hired for a team opposing a proposed statewide ban, I wondered: "How can you defend a plastic bag?" As a Sacramento resident, homeowner, dog owner and avid recycler, I say the answer is easy if you challenge preconceived notions with facts and critical thinking.

- This is a solution in search of a problem. Statewide and locally, the approach is the same: parrot other ban proposals as if they are gospel; cite a big number (amount of bags used); mention a few emotionally charged anecdotes (a dead sea turtle); and make sweeping, unsubstantiated statements (plastic is killing our oceans). But where is the hard data showing significant harm and that a ban prevents it? A 2008 San Francisco litter study actually showed a slight uptick of plastic bag litter *after* a ban the previous year. Even so, that city's data showed plastic bags contributed just 0.64 percent of all large litter. Plastic bags make up less than 0.5 percent of all solid waste.

- Calling plastic bags "single use" is disingenuous. Ask any pet owner or parent. If "single use" is the measuring stick, why not ban all bags, diapers, batteries, toilet paper and Starbucks plastic-coated paper coffee cups, which can't be recycled and take years to decompose?

- Plastic bags are byproducts of natural gas – not oil. Bashing Big Oil is always in fashion for some, but they cross into a fantasy land when they link plastic bags to dependence on foreign oil and global warming to justify a ban. There is no connection.

- Recycling hasn't been given a chance. The lack of public education about proper recycling is shameful. State law mandates that grocery stores offer collection; the city's recycling bins welcome them if they're bundled properly. It's insulting that residents aren't given the opportunity to do the

right thing over time.

- Choice. Like a lot of controversial issues, how people shop is an intensely personal decision. If you don't like plastic bags, don't use them. But stay away from my choice. This is a classic case of government overreach and intrusion.
- Cost. Aside from the cost to consumers, implementing bans costs government. In the case of Sacramento, the city's staff report estimates a ban may cost up to \$470,000 with no revenue source identified for this program. If bags clog the city's machinery, invest in better machinery and education. Consumers will still buy bags and receive them from all the retailers exempt from a ban.
- A ban hurts people without a voice. The homeless pushing shopping carts. Seniors in wheelchairs. Welfare moms with strollers. Public transit riders. Who's going to help these folks when their paper bags disintegrate?
- Unintended consequences. Because paper bags take up so much more space than plastic, more delivery truckloads are required. Plastic requires 80 percent less energy to make than paper. Translation: more traffic, emissions and energy use. And what about dog and cat lovers? They'll either buy bags or leave their pet waste where it lands.
- Profit. The state proposal, as well as the Sacramento concept, allows stores to charge customers up to a dime per paper bag. This may not be a lot of money to some, but what about those living on the edge? Grocers appear complicit because they'll profit – by one estimate close to a billion dollars annually statewide.
- Big Brother. What's next? Bring your own mug to Peet's? Ban toxic household batteries because recycling options are practically nonexistent? (California mandates they be recycled.) Shut down restaurants that don't offer vegan options? Or how about mandating gun ownership like Kennesaw, Ga. – after all, its crime rate is below the national average? Of course not. The precedent of micromanaging the citizenry is ominous and undermines a live-and-let-live free society.

Simplistic feel-good policies distract from the fact our elected officials are failing to solve complex real problems most people care about. They grab headlines and provide steppingstones for higher office. But benefiting residents and the environment? Hardly.

Most disturbing to me, the ban movement reflects a divisive black-and-white world pitting emotional zeal against sober common sense. What a far cry from the thoughtful, constructive and energizing approach I saw unify a community back in 1971.

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