

Burnett: Plastic Bag Bans Hurt Shoppers, Retailers and Workers

By H. Sterling Burnett

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A small but increasing number of cities are in a frenzy to ban plastic shopping bags. More than two dozen cities nationwide have either banned plastic grocery bags (and in some cases, paper bags) entirely, or have imposed a fee for using them in order to encourage the use of reusable bags. However, such policies have hidden costs few seem to recognize.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that cities with bag bans have lost commerce, while surrounding cities and neighborhoods benefit as shoppers choose to go elsewhere.

This is consumer choice – most people prefer the plastic bag option for their convenience, flexibility, strength and other obvious reasons.

Many consumers use plastic bags at home. They can be used to line bathroom trash bins, collect Fido's waste and Kitty's cat litter, to securely seal the baby's soiled diapers, and more. I use them to carry donation items, transport dry cleaning and for storage in my garage and attic. Without them, we will likely buy more trash bags and baggies to compensate. As to recycling, it is increasing. Bag bans will reduce the motivation for those recycling efforts.

The reusable bags that are being pushed as an alternative to paper or plastic in locales across the nation have other, rarely considered, drawbacks. On the economic front, China is the leading manufacturer of reusable bags, while plastic bags are made in the U.S. with the industry employing thousands of workers. Thus, cities banning plastic bags are helping China take over one more industry while putting American workers in the unemployment line.

There are also health concerns associated with reusable bags and these problems are already making people sick. When used to carry meats, poultry or fish, blood and other fluids can soak into the reusable bags. If not cleaned regularly and stored properly, bacteria – including e-coli — can take up residence and mold can form. Continued use can contaminate the users own food and even the food of others as the contaminated reusable bags come into contact with the grocery conveyor belt. It's true that reusable bags can be washed, but doing so shortens their useful life considerably.

Sadly, much of the push to ban plastic retail bags is based on false or misreported data.

Ban proponents claim that plastic bags are rarely used more than once and that they make up a large portion of landfill content litter on roadways. In Austin, the city council seems to be particularly influenced by a presentation from Bob Gedert, director of city department Austin Resource Recovery, in which he stated that plastic bags comprise 2.2 percent of the city's litter. Gedert cited a study whose lead author was Steven Stein as the source for his claim.

However, Stein's study never said that. In fact Gedert exaggerates the percentage of plastic bag litter by 366 percent. What Stein's actually found was that plastic bag litter comprised only 0.6 percent of litter volume, not the 2.2 percent claimed by Gedert. Stein asked Gedert to make a correction. Even the 0.6 percent figure is high since it includes other types of plastic waste, such as industrial wrapping, dry cleaner and trash bags. Indeed, the national 2009 Keep America Beautiful study does not even include plastic bags in its top ten sources of litter.

Bad data makes bad policy. In this case, the evidence shows that plastic bags are a miniscule waste problem and that every city that bans plastic bags costs its shoppers, businesses, the city government and workers across the nation with little or no benefit for the environment or economy.

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