

OP-ED: All San Mateo cities should adopt county bag ban

October 25, 2012, 05:00 AM By David Lewis and Ron Fong

The recent passage of a model bag ban by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors could be a boon for the Bay without harming businesses. To protect the Bay from trash and level the playing field for businesses from San Jose to San Francisco, all cities in San Mateo County should adopt this simple, effective ordinance.

The ordinance bans single-use plastic bags at all retail stores, except restaurants, and requires businesses to charge customers a minimum of 10 cents for each paper bag. The California Grocers Association supports this regional approach that creates consistency for businesses and consumers while benefiting the environment.

Bans combined with store charges are also a powerful incentive to nudge consumers to bring their own reusable bags. According to the association, stores located in cities that require bag charges report that up to 90 percent of customers bring their own, a clear win for the environment.

The impact of plastic bag pollution on our rivers, bays and oceans is well documented. Plastic never biodegrades in a marine environment, and it smothers wetlands and chokes wildlife. Even if people are conscientious about not littering, lightweight bags blow out of uncovered garbage cans, down storm drains and into our waterways. Californians use 19 billion plastic bags annually, and at least 1 million end up in San Francisco Bay. Eliminating this pervasive litter doesn't just benefit the environment; it saves cities from spending money to unclog storm drains and clean streets and creeks. Regulating bags will help everyone's bottom line.

San Mateo County partnered with more than 20 cities, including six in neighboring Santa Clara County, and conducted a full environmental impact report to develop this model ordinance. The results speak for themselves in this week's unanimous vote by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors to approve the recommendation. Now it's time for cities to move forward and adopt a uniform approach throughout the county.

A healthy San Francisco Bay is essential to our quality of life and our economy. As more cities ban plastic bags, and encourage consumer adoption of reusable bags region-wide, it will make a huge difference for the Bay and wildlife, while reducing consumer confusion.

Thanks to the leadership of San Francisco, San Jose and other cities, half the Bay Area population now lives in communities where bans on single-use plastic bags are in force or imminent. All cities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties should join them, and make the whole Peninsula plastic bag-free.

David Lewis is executive director of Save The Bay, the San Francisco Bay Area's oldest and largest organization working to protect and restore the Bay. Ron Fong is president and CEO of the California Grocers Association, a nonprofit, statewide trade association representing the food industry since 1898.