

City and County Beat

Austin passes bag ban

By Sarah Coppola | Friday, March 2, 2012, 2:08 AM

At 2 a.m. today, the Austin City Council passed one of the broadest bag laws in the nation, agreeing to ban disposable paper and plastic bags at all retail checkout counters starting in March 2013.

Before and after the ban takes effect, the city plans to do a \$2 million education campaign to make customers aware of the change and remind them to bring reusable bags.

The council decided not to enact a fee on disposable bags before the ban takes effect. A fee had been discussed as a way to help shoppers and retailers prepare for the ban.

Austin is the first big Texas city to pass a bag ban. More than two dozen U.S. cities have bag laws, most of them prohibiting plastic bags and imposing a fee on paper.

In Austin, retailers will be able to offer only reusable bags, defined as those made of cloth, durable materials or thicker paper and plastic bags that have handles.

Exempt will be single-use bags used for bulk foods, meat, fish and produce, newspaper delivery, dry cleaning and restaurant carry-out foods. Also exempt will be the bags that charities and nonprofits use to distribute food and other items.

Plastics industry companies have said thin plastic bags can be easily recycled and reused for things like lining trash cans and picking up pet waste. But city leaders have said the bags often end up as litter or landfill trash and cause environmental harm. Activists urged the City Council to ban single-use paper bags as well, saying they take more energy to make and transport.

The Texas Retailers Association has been the most vocal opponent of a ban, saying it would discourage retailers from continuing programs they've built to accept plastic bags and other plastic packaging for recycling, meaning more of those goods could end up in landfills.

In recent weeks, ban opponents have urged the city to pursue a program that will allow Austin residents to put plastic bags in their curbside recycling carts. Currently, the city doesn't accept plastic bags through its curbside collection and recycling program because the bags can damage recycling machinery.

But Bob Gedert, the director of the city's trash and recycling department, said adding plastic bags to the curbside program would be costly and difficult to carry out. He also said Austin should focus on reducing the number of plastic bags in circulation, not simply on continuing to make and recycle them.

The council did not begin discussing the measure until after 11 p.m. Thursday. Late Thursday and stretching into this morning, about 15 people stuck around to give the council their thoughts on the proposed ban; most were in favor.