



Three Things to Watch For in the Bag Ban Vote

February 29, 2012 5:33 pm by: Wells Dunbar

The hotly debated question of whether to ban disposable bags comes to the Austin City Council tomorrow.

The council is posted to hear comments and take action on the proposal in a public hearing tomorrow evening. But considering the proposal has been fluttered around more wildly than a Wal-Mart bag in a strong breeze, it's worth contemplating three aspects of the ban that have remained most controversial.

Here's a brief primer:

Paper or Plastic? Or Both?: Although the proposal started out as a ban on single-use plastic bags, the ordinance has since expanded to include paper bags as well. This hasn't escaped the attention of Mayor Lee Leffingwell, who questioned Austin Resource Recovery (ARR) director Bob Gedert at a previous meeting as to how the ban was broadened.

So how will it go tomorrow? The *Austin American-Statesman* counted council votes and found a narrow council majority – four votes – in favor of a complete ban. (A narrower ban on plastic bags enjoys near-majority support.) Will the lengthy public testimony expected tomorrow be enough to sway any votes?

To Charge or Not to Charge: Another contentious element of the proposal is whether to charge for plastic bags during the interim period between the ban's adoption and its implementation. The draft language of the ban says businesses "must choose between two surcharge calculation methods: 10 cents per bag or 1 dollar per transaction."

But as we previously noted, ARR director Gedert raised the fee issue to only to recommend against it, a measure that Leffingwell applauded. Whether or not to charge the fee will likely be one of the hottest debated aspects of the ban tomorrow. Some, like urban policy blogger Chris Bradford, suggest scrapping the ban altogether but charging for bags going forward.

It's All In the Timing: The draft language hasn't changed in the latest iteration of the bag ban. The initial, interim phase is still slated to begin March 1, 2013 and run through the end of February 2014. The ban would then fully be in place. But considering the myriad revisions the proposal has seen so far, it wouldn't be surprising to see this tweaked either.

The bag ban item is posted as a 4 p.m. time certain item tomorrow, meaning it will not be taken up any earlier than then, but may (and likely will) be heard later that evening.