

Austin Bag Ban Will be Major Challenge for HEB

Grocer says it prefers voluntary measures to reduce litter

By Jim Forsyth

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Austin's new law outlawing both plastic and paper grocery bags will be inconvenient for shoppers, but will be a major expense for Austin's largest grocery store chain, 1200 WOAI news reports.

San Antonio based HEB says the law, which will allow only reusable cloth or reusable heavy paper bags to be used by shoppers, will require some 20,000 hours of training for its Austin employees and managers.

"Well over 20,000 hours of training that we will need to make happen, and we have a long list of other training programs that we have to draft and create and then get out to our stores," Austin HEB executive Leslie Sweet told 1200 WOAI news.

The new Austin law may be the toughest bag ban in the nation. While many cities banned those cheap plastic bags and placed fees on paper bags to discourage their use, few have gone so far as to ban both paper and plastic bags.

"We need to upgrade our racks in our stores and look at how our front ends are set up better to accommodate customers, and the increased use of reusable bags that will be happening," she said.

Supporters of the bag ban say it will drastically cut down on the litter problem around Austin. They say both plastic and paper bags end up on roadsides, in draining ditches, and in parks.

"We also need to roll out an extensive compliance program to help support customers throughout this transition," Sweet said.

The bag ban has not been completely thought through. For example, nobody is sure what, if any, penalty there will be for business which continues to provide bags for a customer's convenience. It is also not certain which businesses will receive exemptions, which are expected to be doled out to politically well-connected cronies and financial supporters of city officials.

Sweet says HEB will work closely with city officials to insure compliance, but Sweet says voluntary bag rules, like those in place in San Antonio, are actually much more effective in combating litter.

“HEB prefers to work with voluntary measure with our customers on paper and plastic bag recycling measures,” she said.