S. Tahoe council refuses to ban plastic bags

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's proposed plastic bag ban is in the garbage – for now.

The council on a 3-0 vote (Councilwoman Angela Swanson was absent) decided to not adopt an ordinance that would have banned plastic bags at stores throughout the city. They were not convinced of the environmental need in Tahoe or why they would want to legislate morality.



Plastic is allowed in South Lake Tahoe.

The city's Sustainability Commission brought the idea forward after it had been discussed for more than three years. At the same Jan. 22 meeting, the council did away with the commission. That decision was initially proposed in the fall. Now the commission must decide if it wants to remain intact as a committee.

As for the plastic bags, it's not that the council doesn't want to help the environment, but the three had issues with various components of the proposal.

“I would like the stores to decide if they want to charge for paper,” Councilman Hal Cole said.

The proposal was to charge 10 cents per paper bag.

Kay Ogden, a member of the Sustainability Commission, said there are legal reasons for needing to have a fee associated with the paper if plastic were banned.

City Attorney Patrick Enright said changing the wording from “shall” to “may” for the paper fee would also trigger more CEQA analysis. As written, South Lake Tahoe’s proposal got by the California Environmental Quality Act with a categorical ban.

The bags used for produce and meat would have been exempt. And plastic of a certain thickness are considered reusable.

But Councilwoman JoAnn Conner says she and many of her friends reuse the plastic bags groceries come in.

The EPA says 5 percent of plastic bags are recycled. The Sustainability Commission says 8 million single use plastic bags are used in South Tahoe each year.

Ogden along with Juliana Prosperi said the plastic bag ban would help Tahoe businesses. Their presentation said it is estimated $200 a year in state and federal taxes are spent per person to clean up litter and waste associated with single use bags.

“In all of your documents you talk about cost savings, but I don’t see it,” Mayor Tom Davis said.

His biggest issue was with the potential bacteria growing in reusable canvas bags if people aren’t regularly washing them. He cited a study that says 97 percent of people don’t wash their bags.

Davis said he would prefer the plastic bag issue be resolved

at the state level. In California, 60 cities and eight counties have adopted plastic bag bans, according to Ogden.

Everyone agreed educating the consumer about perceived and real harms of plastic bags needs to be done so more people would voluntarily use something other than a one-time plastic bag.