

South Lake Tahoe says no to plastic bags

By Kathryn Reed

If you like plastic bags, then load up on them now because on Jan. 15 retailers will no longer be allowed to use them in South Lake Tahoe.

On a 3-2 vote Oct. 1, the City Council agreed to ban single-use plastic bags that are given out at the cash register. Councilmembers Tom Davis and JoAnn Conner cast the dissenting votes.

With the passage on Tuesday, this brings the number of municipalities in California with such a ban to 89. (Santa Barbara passed a ban on Oct. 1, too.)

It was in October 2009 that the city's Sustainability Commission first started talking about the plastic bag ban. Several meetings focused on that topic, with tons of community input.

Since the council disbanded the commission a group of concerned citizens has continued the quest to have the city ban the bags. Part of the reason is to eliminate an item that most people only use once, to keep the product out of landfills, to stop the production of a product that uses tons of petroleum, and to make the city an environmental leader.

Davis, in all seriousness, said the city is already an environmental leader because of its bike paths and public transportation.

Davis, as he has said at multiple meetings, also said plastic bags are not a problem.

"You've gotta show me it's a local problem," Davis said. "If

there are 8 million bags (in South Lake Tahoe used each year) and you only picked up 275 (on Coastal Cleanup Day), I would say that is not a problem.”

To this Councilman Hal Cole said, “Even if all the bags are off the street, they are in a landfill and that’s a problem.” A stat from the meeting is that 5 percent of what is in landfills is plastic. “They measure by weight. That’s a lot of plastic,” Cole added.

It’s not like plastic bags have always been a part of daily life. They arrived at grocery stores as an alternative to paper in 1977. From there department stores started using them.

Assuming the council on Oct. 15 at the second reading of the ordinance approves the ban, the first stores that must get rid of their plastic bags are grocery stores. That happens Jan. 15. Then on Oct. 15, 2014, all other retail entities must eliminate their plastic.

Produce bags and bags from the meat department will be allowed. Nonprofits will be able to use plastic bags. For example, each Monday at Bread & Broth people are given a plastic bag full of food to take with them. Pharmacies are also exempt from the regulation.

Retailers, if they want, will be able to charge whatever they want for paper bags. Many cities have imposed a mandatory fee for paper as a way to incentivize people to bring reusable bags with them.

Cole was adamant this was a fee or another tax. Such an imposition here was going to be a deal breaker for him.

When the 5-cent fee that had been recommended was stricken from the ordinance, Cole was able to vote for it.

Other towns, like Aspen, have used the bag fee to fund

outreach – including buying reusable bags for people; while giving a percentage of the funds to the retailer. Aspen has a 20-cent fee that has raised \$44,826 since May 2012, according to the *Aspen Times*.

Five of the eight people who spoke at the Oct. 1 South Tahoe meeting were in favor of the ban, including Jim Warlow who owns Cork & More. The nine emails the council received regarding the bag ban were all in favor of the ordinance.