



TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 2013

SLAP A FEE ON CARRY-OUT BAGS

BY THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD

Charging for both plastic and paper would encourage people to switch to reusable bags while providing convenience and choice for the times they forget to bring them.

The most sensible solution to the ocean and stream pollution caused by carry-out plastic bags would be to charge a small fee for them. People will do almost anything to avoid even a tiny levy — tote their own reusable bags, toss their loose groceries into the trunk. Unfortunately, none of the three bills in the Legislature to address the plastic bag problem would work that way.

Consumers already pay for carry-out bags; they just don't realize it because the cost is rolled into the price of the goods they buy, creating the illusion that the bags are free. Where they've been made explicit, fees of just 5 cents have cut plastic bag use 75% to 90%.

Still, people occasionally need or want the convenience of a plastic bag and would pay a little extra for one, so why not? The goal should be to greatly reduce the number of bags floating around as trash — the flimsy bags with handles are the second most common trash item found along California's beaches, and they contribute to the giant floating garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean — but not to make people live without them entirely. People who pay for the bags are more likely to reuse them. (For unknown reasons, the plastic bags that grocery shoppers use for their vegetables — and those used to wrap this newspaper — do not tend to end up as trash in or near waterways.)

Although a 2006 California law prohibits cities from adopting fees on plastic bags, it hasn't stopped municipalities from taking action. More than 70 have banned the bags outright, including Los Angeles, whose ban will take effect later this year. The patchwork of laws around the state — some cities and counties ban both paper and plastic bags, some ban plastic but levy a fee on paper, some have no law at all — is confusing for retail chains and consumers, and the bans eliminate consumer choice.

Legislation to bring some coherence to this situation has consistently failed. This year three bills have been introduced, two of which are nearly identical, and none of them gets it right. Two would ban plastic and place a fee on paper bags. At first glance, the third looks closer to the mark — it would place a 5-cent tax on both kinds of bags and use the proceeds for parks and litter removal — but it contains a spoiler provision that would allow municipalities to opt out. Its effect would be negligible, even though cities that didn't participate wouldn't be eligible to receive the money for their parks.

Lawmakers could do better. A fee on both plastic and paper would encourage people to switch to reusable bags while providing convenience and choice for the times they forget to bring them. As with existing law on bottles and cans, people could pay a redemption fee that could be reclaimed when the bags were returned for recycling. A reasonable law shouldn't be this hard.