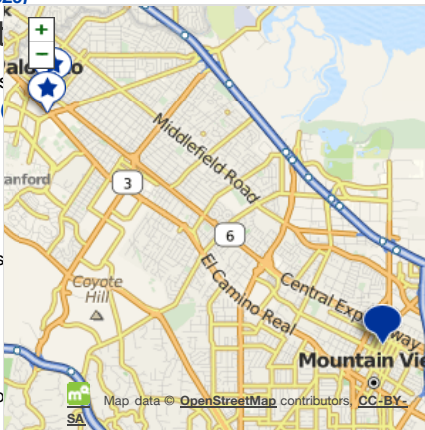


Editor [Aaron Selverston](#): Heard some news you want us to check out? Let me know: aarons@patch.com

Business (<http://paloalto.patch.com/search/articles?cat=1998198829>)

Local Cities Work To Eliminate Plastic

Ever since Palo Alto banned the use of plastic bags in all grocery stores...
By [Jennifer van der Kleut](#) (</users/jennifer-van-der-kleut>) | [Email the author](#)



follow suit.

Plastic—it surrounds us. It's in the water bottles we sip, the containers our babies suck.

But for Palo Altans, plastic is not found in our grocery bags.

In 2009, the city banned the use of plastic bags in all local grocery stores, inspiring other local towns to do the same.

If the organization [Green Mountain View](#) has its way, Mountain View may soon join the ranks of cities like Palo Alto that are moving toward a future with no plastic bags.

Palo Alto's Ban on Plastic Bags in Grocery Stores

Phil Bobel with the [city of Palo Alto's public works department](#) said there were many reasons for Palo Alto to rid its grocery stores of plastic bags.

"We had been, for many years, trying to encourage people to use reusable bags, to cut down on waste in general, whether it be plastic bags or paper, to reduce that waste, and reduce that energy," Bobel explained. "Then, a slightly different angle started to emerge as we found plastic bags in our creeks, in our bay, and a buildup of plastic particles in our ocean. That led us to take a slightly more dramatic action."

Those discoveries led to the city-wide ban, Bobel said.

"With that kind of buildup in our ecosystem, we decided that action [of using plastic bags] should go, immediately."

The city decided that grocery stores were the right place to start.

One unforeseen side effect, he said, is that many stores have simply switched to paper bags.

"So we are considering banning those, too," he said. "At this time, that action is still under consideration."

The Evils of Plastic

Ellen Lee Gibson, a volunteer coordinator for the organization [Green Mountain View \(GMV\)](#)—which is campaigning to get Mountain View grocery stores to follow Palo Alto's example and discontinue the use of plastic bags—said there are many reasons to hate plastic.

"Plastic never biodegrades; it photodegrades, meaning it just breaks up into tiny little pieces," she said, and further explained that those little pieces eventually end up in the ocean, are eaten by fish—and then we buy that fish at a market and eat it.

"So, basically, we're eating the plastic—and the problem with that is, there's a lot of chemicals in plastic," she said. "Since I started down this road, I've learned a lot of disturbing things about plastic."

Plastic is not only bad for our bodies and for the environment, but is bad for our cities as well, said John Pilger, a communications officer for the city of Sunnyvale, who spoke with *Patch* recently about how plastic bags are causing damage to the sorting machines used by the recycling teams at the local [SMaRT Station](#).

Pilger explained that plastic bags are almost impossible for the machines to sort and end up getting stuck in the machines, constantly clogging them up. Pilger sent *Patch* the photos that accompany this article, showing a large number of plastic bags stuck in the machine, versus a photo of what the machine should look like when it is operating smoothly, with no plastic bags.

Gibson further discussed how plastic water bottles are harmful to both our health and the environment, even when they are recycled.



PHOTOS (5)



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"The problem with recycling is—yes, that's better than throwing it out, but—if you start with a plastic with a lot of chemicals and harmful elements in it, as you keep recycling it over and over, it keeps getting worse, with downscaling of all the toxins," she said. "You can tell sometimes—if you smell a piece of plastic and it smells like petrol, and smells pretty bad, that's because it has been downscaled too many times."

It's a lot easier than people think for the chemicals in plastic water bottles to leak into our water and be consumed, or for the plastic in a food container to leak into our food and be eaten, Gibson said.

She admitted that it can be very difficult to eliminate plastic from our everyday lives, but said there are small ways that we, as a society, can start, such as by carrying reusable bags everywhere we go for our groceries and other purchases, and by carrying reusable water bottles with us that are made from a material other than plastic.

"I have found it quite a challenge to rid plastics from every area of my life. They are everywhere," she said. "So, it's been quite an interesting journey, personally."

Going Reusable – Is It Really So Hard?

For many people, plastic bags are just so convenient. They say, the idea of reusable bags is great, but it's just too hard to remember to take them to the store.

But some say it's an adjustment that people are just going to have to make, sooner or later, as disposable bags slowly start to disappear from cities across the country.

Many businesses in Palo Alto have noticed their customers warming up to the new habit of switching to reusable bags and remembering to bring them wherever they go.

Perrie Pagnotta, marketing director for [Whole Foods grocery store in Palo Alto](#), said the campaign the city of Palo Alto launched to help customers transition to reusable bags was a very effective one. The city provided each grocery store with signs to hang in the store and in the parking lot, to remind customers to bring their reusable bags, and with items like magnets for their cars, as an additional bag reminder.

"It was a pleasing ban for us, when the city made that choice," Pagnotto said. "Then everyone else jumped on the bandwagon."

Pagnotto said the majority of Whole Foods' customers regularly carry reusable bags.

"I'd say, at least 50 percent of our customers bring them in," she estimated.

Whole Foods offers additional incentives to help customers remember, such as its "Nickels for Nonprofits" program. Every time a customer uses reusable bags, or opts to purchase reusable bags on the spot instead of asking for paper bags, the company will either give them a nickel back in cash or, if the customer chooses, donate it on their behalf to a Palo Alto nonprofit organization or charity.

In an effort to move away from plastic bags, [Books Inc.](#) stores are working toward being able to offer a free, reusable bag to all customers who make a purchase, said Michael Tucker, Books Inc.'s president.

Even before discussions of bans on plastic bags began, Tucker said that Books Inc.—which has locations all across California, including in both [Mountain View](#) and [Palo Alto](#)—was already trying to move in that direction, all on its own.

Tucker said that at this time, Books Inc. employees do not offer customers plastic bags unless they ask for them; it offers customers reusable bags instead—at no cost to the customer.

"We're trying to, at this point, rather than try to charge for them, just give them away," he said.

Although Books Inc. stores still use plastic bags, Tucker said the use has gone way down and that the store will eventually make a complete transition to reusable bags, offering one for free to any customer who makes a purchase.

"So we still use plastic, but less and less so," he said. "Our customers are really on the cutting edge and really want to [support this effort.] So, just with public perception alone, our use has gone down about 30 percent."

Right now, Tucker said Books Inc. is looking into different suppliers and cost models to find a way to make it financially feasible to offer reusable bags exclusively to their customers, for no charge, with every purchase.

"Pricing on reusable bags varies so much from community to community, but pricing will go down on reusable bags as more and more businesses move to them," he predicted.

Tucker thinks that if more cities and businesses stop the use of plastic bags, people will simply have to create the new habit of remembering to carry reusable bags with them.

"I think when it becomes so inconvenient not to have your bag with you, more people will remember," he predicted. "Hopefully, a dialogue such as this one will make more people aware and think about it."

Will Mountain View Follow Palo Alto's Example?

Green Mountain View is in the early stages of its campaign, which it calls "Bring Your Own Bag." The current phase involves reaching out to grocery stores to try to gain their support and agreement to participate.

The campaign was modeled after Palo Alto's campaign.

"We are trying to encourage the local grocery stores, and eventually retail stores and pharmacies as well, to come on board with the campaign and put up signs all over the stores and in the parking lots, reminding customers to bring their own bags," Gibson explained. "So, right now, what I'm doing is gathering citizens of Mountain View to go to stores and talk to managers and ask them if they are willing to put on a campaign in their store. Then, hopefully, in the next month or two, stores will begin their campaigns."

Will all of this lead to a city-mandated ban on plastic bags in grocery stores, just like Palo Alto's campaign did?

Gibson said that it's too early to tell, but that is certainly where she would like the campaign to lead.

"We really need to stop using so much plastic—because, the fact is, we live in this throw-away society," she said.

Lori Topley with the city of Mountain View's public works department said that actions similar to Palo Alto's are not being considered at this time and are not a goal for the city of Mountain View. She would, however, like to see residents' dependence on plastic bags reduced—both from an environmental perspective and a financial one, because recycling plastic bags is a difficult and costly effort.

"It's not a good use of the world's resources," she said. "We would like people to bring their own bags and reuse them, again and again."

Do you use reusable bags? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

Comments (2)

Paul Saunders

12:57pm on Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Polyethylene plastic bags may not be degradable, but there are other substances which do that has a similar texture. There are perfectly serviceable alternatives such as cellulose nitrate and polylactide which DO biodegrade quite well. Instead of banning plastics, mandate something that is biodegradable.



Jennifer van der Kleut

3:47pm on Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Great info, Paul, thanks! Maybe you should suggest that to the Public Works Dept? They may not know such an alternative exists.

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