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Plastic bag ban clears City Council

Shoppers soon will have to bring their own or pay for paper; anti-coal resolution also passes

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The Eugene City Council on Monday night flexed its environmental muscle, approving a ban on plastic bags and a statement in opposition to coal trains.

The council voted 6-2 to ban thin plastic bags from all of the city's retailers. On a closer 5-3 vote, councilors approved a resolution against the railroad shipment of coal through the city.

The ban will take effect in six months, in order to give stores time to eliminate their plastic bag supplies.

Environmentalists asked the council for the plastic bag ban, saying that discarded bags do not degrade, with many ending up in the ocean where they pollute and endanger marine life for years.

The ordinance implementing the ban requires retailers to charge a minimum of 5 cents for each paper bag dispensed in place of plastic bags.

Councilors Mike Clark and George Poling voted against the ban.

Clark said he supported the ban until the nickel-per-paper-bag minimum charge was added. "This is about controlling people's behavior and getting people to act differently," he said.

Councilor Alan Zelenka, the ordinance's main author, noted that the state's grocers association supports the fee as an incentive for shoppers to use reusable bags and to allow retailers to offset the higher cost of paper bags.

Without the 5 cent fee, "there will be a massive shift to paper bags" by shoppers, which doesn't achieve the real goal of getting people to use reusable bags, he said.

Joining Zelenka in support of the ban were Councilors Chris Pryor, George Brown, Andrea Ortiz, Betty Taylor and Pat Farr.

The ban contains exemptions, such as the bags used to carry produce, meat and bulk food.

Restaurants could continue to use the bags for hot carry-out food and drinks. Thicker plastic bags, including those given to customers at department stores, would still be allowed.

Eugene will become the third Oregon city with a plastic bag ban, joining Portland and Corvallis.

Since the proposal was first introduced last year, the council heard from many residents who said they favor the ban, in contrast to relatively little public opposition.

The coal train resolution arose in response to the possibility of Wyoming and Montana coal being shipped by railroad through Eugene to Coos Bay. A yet-to-be built export terminal on Coos Bay would be used to put coal on ships bound for South Korea, where it would be burned to produce electricity.

The resolution directs city attorneys to research whether the city could use state and federal public health and safety laws to prevent the transport of coal in its boundaries. It also supports the request by Gov. John Kitzhaber for the federal government to conduct a comprehensive environmental review of how coal exports and the burning of coal in Asia would affect the Northwest.

Yet the council's resolution could prove to be more symbolic than substantive.

The Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency that regulates railroads, has said state and local governments can't enact laws that would significantly interfere with railroad operations, such as prohibiting the movement of trains on existing rail lines.

Coastal leaders opposed Eugene's resolution, saying the \$250 million export terminal and \$180 million in improvements to the port-owned rail line between Eugene and the coast would provide critically needed jobs to coast communities and beyond.

Farr joined Clark and Poling in opposing the resolution. Voting for it were Zelenka, Pryor, Ortiz, Brown and Taylor.

"If anything is a no-brainer, this is it," said Taylor.

While the council resolution may not be able to prevent the passage of coal trains through the city, "we can express an opinion and stand up for the environment and common sense," Taylor said.

The city's resolution will be sent to state and federal elected officials, including Kitzhaber, U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, and appointed U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

Several people spoke in favor of the resolution during the public forum portion of the council's meeting. A few people spoke against it, mainly because they said the coal export project would create jobs.

The Coos Bay proposal is one of a handful of coal export projects being considered in the Northwest.

Elise Hamner, a spokeswoman for the Oregon International Port of Coos Bay, said the city of Eugene's resolution will not affect its work on a proposal that port officials have dubbed "Project Mainstay." The port is negotiating with three firms interested in developing the export terminal on the north spit of Coos Bay.

"The entities involved in Project Mainstay will make a determination whether to proceed with a development based on results of internal business analyses related to global market issues, permitting, transportation infrastructure investment and other matters," Hamner said Monday.

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