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More comprehensive alternatives still exist

Last Tuesday I took a trip down memory lane. After extracting my morning paper from two plastic bags and reading about our region's ongoing drought, I visited three retailers on my way to work. Each offered me a complimentary paper bag for my purchases. Two of the three had plastic bags available, but for a price.

The experience reminded me of earlier times when I could count on three things:

- 1) The Longhorns would be conference champs in football and compete for a national title;
- 2) The Longhorns would be conference champs in baseball and compete for a national title; and
- 3) I would bring my purchases home in a paper bag.

All that changed in the 1980s. The first two issues are too painful to discuss, but as to the third, in the 1980s plastic bags became the environmentally desirable alternative to paper bags, for reasons that hold true today. These include:

- › Paper bags require nearly four times more energy to produce than plastic bags;
- › Paper bags are seven times heavier and take up seven times more space;
- › Paper requires 91 percent more energy to recycle than plastic; and
- › Paper bags require 25 times more water to produce than plastic bags.

In 2010, things changed again. Austin proposed banning plastic bags to protect the environment and burnish its progressive image.

The Texas Retailers Association opposed the ban as regressive, not comprehensive and injurious to existing recycling programs. Despite our objections, Austin approved the bag ban and made plans to spend \$2 million on a public information campaign.

Were there more constructive and comprehensive alternatives to banning plastic bags? We think so. Consider:

A TRA-sponsored "Reduce, Reuse and Recycle" pilot study resulted in a 20 percent reduction in plastic bags used, a 74 percent increase in plastic bags being recycled and more than 907,000 reusable bags sold at participating stores. TRA then created the "A Bag's Life" website (www.abagslife.com) with a ZIP code directory to direct residents to stores with recycling bins.

The "Yellow Bag" program, which was proposed to Austin, is a collaboration between the city of Georgetown and Texas Disposal Systems. Residents are provided with specially designed "yellow bags" to be filled with plastic bags and pitched into the city's single-stream recycling bins. In a pilot program for a year, Georgetown, its residents and Texas Disposal Systems are very pleased with its progress.

Iowa's "Build with Bags" is a collaboration between Iowa grocers, Keep Iowa Beautiful and others. Participants encourage residents to recycle plastic bags with local retailers and award grants to schools and parks for picnic tables, benches and other products made from recycled plastic bags. After four years, the Iowa program has awarded more than \$150,000 to more than 100 schools and parks, diverting tons of plastic bags from landfills.

But Austin has adopted bag ban. After a year, what are the perceived benefits? Is the ban reducing Austin's cost in managing what amounts to 0.6 percent of its solid waste? Not likely.

Do citizens find the ban frustrating and inconvenient? Are plastic bags, including "reusable" bags, still being hauled to the landfill? Has the ban induced Austin citizens to shop outside city limits? Based on calls we still receive, the answers are: "Yes, Yes, and Yes".

Proponents might say the benefit is the elimination of plastic bags from our city. But the ordinance does not ban:

- › Laundry bags, newspaper bags, restaurant bags, door hanger and other bags exempted by the ordinance;
- › Bread bags, ice bags, shrink wrap and other plastic bags in which manufacturers wrap their products; and

› Plastic bags provided to a sizable number of Austin residents by retailers in Rollingwood, Cedar Park, Kyle, Buda, Round Rock and other cities.

There's one thing the ban has achieved. Even during this time of drought, the ban has made paper bags the first option for many retailers, returning me to those days of my youth when I took my purchases home in a paper bag.

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