

Shoppers Reject Using Reusable Bags

A TENANT OF PLASTIC BAG BANS IS TO SHIFT SHOPPERS TO USING REUSABLE BAGS

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Bag usage surveys conducted to date overwhelmingly show that shoppers have rejected using reusable bags and preferred to use paper bags or NO bags at all by a ratio of about two-to-one. While the stated intent of most plastic bag ban ordinances is to shift the majority of shoppers into using reusable bags, and reinforced by imposing minimum fees on paper bags in order to coerce shoppers into using reusable bags, the exact opposite has happened instead. This is not surprising since using reusable bags is not without its own set of problems. (Williams & van Leeuwen, 2014)

Typical Plastic Bag Ban

Bag Bans implemented in communities throughout the State of California are very similar to one another. Essentially, plastic carryout bags are banned, and a minimum fee is imposed on each paper bag distributed in order to coerce shoppers into using reusable bags instead. The ordinance also establishes minimum requirements for both paper and reusable shopping bags as well as exemptions to the paper bag fee for certain low income groups.

Environmental Impact Report (EIR) Assumptions

In order to implement a plastic bag ban, most communities prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that contain assumptions about current and future bag usage by consumers. Because most communities never conduct surveys of bag usage by consumers, due to cost, most EIRs assume 100% plastic bag use by residents before the ban, even though many shoppers use paper bags or reusable bags. Post Ban, the EIRs assume that 65% of the plastic bags are replaced by an appropriate number of reusable bags and 30% of plastic bags are replaced by paper bags and that 5% of plastic bags will remain with non-regulated stores. These assumptions are shown in Table 1 and demonstrate that the intent of the plastic bag ban is that most people (at least 65%) would adopt using reusable bags.

Bag Usage Surveys

Despite the widespread adoption of plastic bag bans, only two credible bag usage surveys have been conducted to date that compares bag usage before and after a plastic bag ban. Each of the bag usage surveys were conducted differently making comparison harder but not impossible.

In the City of Santa Monica, a Santa Monica High School student environmental group called Team Marine, conducted bag usage surveys over a two year period both before and after Santa Monica's plastic bag ban. The Team Marine survey observed customers leaving retail stores and counted

customers who used no bags, paper bags, plastic bags and reusable bags. The survey did not count the number of bags used by customers. The Team Marine survey establishes the proportion of customers using plastic, paper, reusable bags, and no bags. (Team Marine, 2013)

In the City of San Jose, city staff conducted surveys both before and after San Jose's plastic bag ban. City staff counted the total number of customers, the number of customers who left the store with NO bags, and then counted the number of plastic, paper, or reusable bags used by those customers who used bags. This survey established the proportion of plastic, paper, and reusable bags used but did not establish the proportion of customers who used these bags. (Romanov, 2012) It should be noted that the methodology used by San Jose is quite different than that used in the Santa Monica survey making direct comparison difficult.

No Bag Usage

In the City of Santa Monica, shoppers who chose to use No Bags increased from 15% to 36% after the plastic bag ban. Similarly, in San Jose the number of shoppers who chose to use No Bags increased from 12.9% to 43.5%. This data is shown in Table 1.

Paper Bag Usage

In the City of Santa Monica, paper bag usage went up from 5% Pre Ban to 23% Post Ban and increased to 29% one-year after the ban. What this means is that despite the paper bag fee, paper bag use increased after the bag ban with a clear **upward** trend. (Team Marine, 2013)

In the City of San Jose, paper bag usage increased from an estimated 10.3% to 18.8% when bag proportions are adjusted by the percentage of customers using bags (see Table 1 figures in parenthesis).

For both Santa Monica and San Jose, we see the number of customers using paper bags increasing after implementation of a ban on plastic carryout bags. The imposed paper bag fee does not appear to be a significant deterrent and over time people get used to it with paper bags usage then going up. (Team Marine, 2013) This is to be expected, since the fee imposed on paper bags is financially competitive with the total cost of using reusable bags. (van Leeuwen & Williams, Plastic Bag Alternatives Much More Costly to Consumers, 2013) In time, as more and more people get used to the fee and become frustrated with the difficulties of using reusable bags, shoppers will increasingly choose paper bags or no bags at all. (Williams & van Leeuwen, 2014)

Reusable Bags

Most plastic bag bans have as one of the objectives to promote "*a shift toward the use of reusable carryout bags by retail customers.*" This objective suggests that the ordinance should result in a significant increase in reusable bag usage once plastic carryout bags are banned. In Table 1, reusable bag usage increased for both the cities of Santa Monica and San Jose.

For the city of Santa Monica the use of reusable bags increased from 10% to 41% immediately after the ban and then settled down to 35% after one year with what appears to be a **downward trend**. What the reader should note is that the use of reusable bags went up from 10% to 35% or an increase of only a marginal 25%.

Similar results exist for the City of San Jose (surveys mainly of grocery stores only) where reusable bag use went up from approximately 2.7% to 36.4% for a marginal increase of 33.7%.

The reader should realize that in both Santa Monica and San Jose the increased use of reusable bags was marginal which is one reason why the author declares plastic bag bans a failure, even though the ordinance is successful in banning plastic bags. For more information see the article titled "[Bag Bans: A Failure Not Success As Claimed](#)". (van Leeuwen & Williams, Bag Bans: A Failure - Not Success As Claimed, 2013)

Table 1. Pre Ban and Post Ban Carryout Bag Usage

Study	Plastic Bags	Paper Bags	Reusable Bags	No Bags or Other
EIR Assumptions[§]				
Pre Ban	100%	0%	0%	0%
Post Ban	5%	30%	65%	0%
Santa Monica (Team Marine Study)[‡]				
Pre Ban	69%	5%	10%	15%
Post Ban	0%	23%	41%	36%
Post Ban + 1 Year	0%	29%	35%	36%
San Jose[¥]				
Pre Ban	85% (74%)	11.9% (10.3%)	3.1% (2.7%)	12.9%
Post Ban	2.3% (1.3%)	33.3% (18.8%)	64.4% (36.4%)	43.5%

§ EIR Assumptions come from the EIRs for San Mateo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties.

‡ Santa Monica Data is based upon the number of customers using each bag type or no bag.

¥ San Jose Data is based upon the quantity of bags used, total customers using bags and no bags. The percentages in parenthesis are adjusted numbers derived by multiplying the percentage times the percentage of people using bags. This allows us to compare results.

Conclusion

Both surveys clearly show that reusable bag usage went up, and also clearly shows that shoppers chose the No Bag and paper bag option over reusable bags.

For the City of Santa Monica, customers using paper bags (29%) and no bags (36%) for a total of 65% compared to customers using reusable (35%) is a ratio of 65%:35% or about a 2:1 ratio. Similarly, for the

City of San Jose, customers using paper bags (18.8%) and no bags (43.5%) for a total of 62.3% is a ratio of 62.3%:36.4% or about a 2:1 ratio.

Hence, shoppers have largely rejected using reusable bags by a 2:1 ratio and the objective of shifting consumers into using reusable bags has produced nothing more than marginal results as a result plastic bag bans can be better characterized as a **Failure**.

Readers who are interested in real solutions to the plastic bag litter problem and environmental concerns should consider reading the following articles:

[Bag Bans: Trading One Problem For Another](#)

[Using Reusable Bags: It's Not That Easy](#)

[Plastic Bag Bans – A Community Could Do So Much Better & For So Much Less!](#)

[Plastic Bag Bans and California's Drought](#)

About The Authors

Anthony van Leeuwen is the founder of the [Fight The Plastic Bag Ban](#) website and writes extensively on the subject. He holds a bachelors and Master's degree in Electronics Engineering and has over 40 years of experience working in the federal government.

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