

Clifton battling use of plastic bags

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CLIFTON — The city's battle against a ubiquitous environmental menace — the plastic grocery bag — has yet to spark citywide "green" consciousness, but it's gaining ground, says Recycling Coordinator Al DuBois.

Environmentalists have been railing against plastic sacks for decades, pointing toward their damage to coastal wildlife and the fact it takes them a millennium to deteriorate. In the past year, the plastic bag debate has hit the mainstream.

In Clifton, the movement against plastic bags began in September, when DuBois helped coordinate the purchase of 500 reusable cloth bags through state recycling grants. Those bags were distributed free to city residents willing to sign a pledge promising to use them "to preserve the environment and be a sustainable citizen."

DuBois will distribute more of the state-funded bags at Clifton's health fair on Saturday at School 16.

"It has been successful," he said Monday. "People are learning. It's the energy you save, it's the reuse."

Before the reusable bag revolution can really gain traction, DuBois will have to change the minds of the legions of consumers like Passaic's Phoebe Winkler.

Pushing a cart with three plastic bags from Super Stop & Shop in Clifton Commons on Monday, Winkler agreed that the plastic bag ban was "not a bad idea."

Although Winkler has a reusable canvas bag at home, she said, filling the bag made it too heavy.

"I like to divide the items," she said.

And if plastic bags were outlawed?

"I'd probably ask for the brown [paper] ones," said Winkler.

According to the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based research concern, Americans throw away about 100 billion polyurethane bags every year, recycling only 0.6 percent of bags they use. The discarded bags can last for 1,000 years in landfills.

The problem has led cities from San Francisco to Dhaka, Bangladesh, to ban plastic bags in large grocery and retail stores. In Ireland, a tax of about 33 cents per bag has caused plastic bag use to drop more than 94 percent since 2002, when the tax was implemented.

Now, legislators in New Jersey are taking an equally aggressive stance against plastic bagging.

In November, Assemblymen Herb Conaway and Jack Connors, both Democrats from Delran, Burlington County, introduced the "Plastic Bag Recycling Act."

The legislation would require supermarkets and retail stores to provide comprehensive in-store plastic bag recycling programs. Large stores would have to sell reusable bags and have a plastic bag collection bin prominently placed.

The act, which calls for the phasing out of plastic bags by the end of 2010, also calls for store operators to provide biodegradable plastic bags for customers. Biodegradable bags are made of a combination of polymers and starches that decompose naturally. They currently cost about 8 cents to produce, compared with the penny that a plastic bag costs to make.

The plastic bag ban has succeeded in San Francisco, said Jenny Powers, a spokeswoman with the New York City-based Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental action group. With a citywide composting system, the bags get thrown in with food scraps for curbside pickup.

But DuBois saw the pending New Jersey legislation as a step backward for state recyclers.

"The legislation needs to be abolished. It's pathetic, it's horrendous. It's not the way to go," said DuBois. "Compostable plastic bags mean that you're throwing them out. There's no environmental sense to that at all."

Both DuBois and Powers said that the best way to combat the plastic bag predicament was through individual responsibility.

"It's really consumers wanting ways to make an impact," said Powers.

But even among the most conscientious, it'll apparently take time before it becomes second nature.

Debbie Oliver, director of Clifton Recreation, has been leading her department in an effort to cut back on plastic bags.

"We're trying to get into the habit of using [reusable bags]," said Oliver. "Sometimes we get to the store and forget to bring the bag. We can carry stuff out in bins, but it's sort of hard to get away from it."

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