

San Mateo County Reusable Bag Ordinance Survey and Reporting Report

Overview

The San Mateo County Reusable Bag Ordinance was implemented on April 22, 2013 by most jurisdictions in the County, with a few cities opting to delay implementation until June or October 2013. San Mateo County Environmental Health staff conducted a pre-survey of thirteen retailers in various cities prior to the ordinance implementation. Retailers were again surveyed nine to thirteen months after implementation of the date their city adopted the ordinance.

Customer Data: Survey Results

Results of the surveys are shown below. Shoppers were observed near the entrances of retail stores, but were not contacted during the survey.

	Prior to Ordinance	Post Implementation
Shoppers Observed	822	1109
Percentage of Shoppers Receiving a Free Plastic/Paper Bag	76%	26% (purchased allowable bag)
Percentage of Shoppers Using Reusable Bags	13%	34%
Percentage of Shoppers Not Using Any Bag (hand carry)	23%	53%
Number of Plastic/Paper Bags Observed	1226	419 (allowable bags)
Note: Some shoppers used all three types of bags, so percentages do not total 100%		

Retailers Data: Reporting

In accordance with San Mateo County’s Reusable Bag Ordinance, retailers must keep “complete and accurate records or documents of the purchase and sale of any recycled paper bag or reusable bag by the retail establishment.” Six retailers with a total of 38 retail locations in San Mateo County were requested to provide data from their store locations. Most retailers sell paper bags as an allowable bag, while some stores carry 2.25 mil plastic bags designed for reuse. Of the retailers surveyed, most conducted outreach to customers with regards to the San Mateo County’s Reusable Bag Ordinance.

	Prior to Ordinance	Post Implementation
Number of Bags (Plastic and Paper) Shipped to Stores	63,379,478*	
Number of Allowable Bags Sold		10,211,088
*Note: Only 24 of 38 retailer locations reported prior to ordinance data.		

Analysis

The data shows that habits related to bag use are slowly beginning to change. There is a 162% increase of people bringing their own bags to the store since the ordinance was implemented. Before the ordinance, many shoppers often received a plastic bag for carrying purchases, with an option for a paper bag as well. There is a 66% decrease in people buying a bag that they would have normally received for free before. There was also a 130% increase in people refusing a bag altogether and hand-carrying their items. Orders for bags by retailers to supply their customers dropped approximately 84%.

Discussion

At this time in California, 98 bag ban ordinances have been approved covering 127 cities and counties. Seventy five ordinances are currently in effect covering 104 cities and counties. Of these 75 ordinances, seven jurisdictions have or are scheduled to implement a 25 cent minimum bag fee: Counties of Santa Cruz and Monterey, and cities of Santa Cruz, Capitola, Watsonville, Gonzales, and Greenfield.

On September 30, 2014, Governor Jerry Brown signed SB 270, statewide legislation banning specified retailers from providing a single-use carryout bag to a customer. This legislation does not impact San Mateo County's Ordinance.

The San Mateo County Reusable Bag Ordinance requires that on or after January 1, 2015, all retail establishments make a recycled paper bag or reusable bag available to customers for a minimum of 25 cents, an increase of 15 cents over the 10 cent charge that is currently in place.

The current survey data shows that more people are bringing their own bag to the store and because fewer bags are being distributed, we can assume there are fewer bags discarded in the environment. While the current charge of 10 cents per bag for purchase appears to be causing a gradual behavior change, the San Mateo County ordinance requires an increase in the bag charge to 25 cents to further discourage the purchase of allowable bags and encourage the use of reusable bags.