

# Opinion: The Carpinteriazation of banned bags

By Joe Mathews

Next month, California might almost catch up with Carpinteria.

The small beach town in Santa Barbara County, population 13,500, is rarely cited as a leader in anything. But when it comes to the California cause of eliminating single-use bags—a cause responsible for two measures on the November ballot—Carpinteria is our model city.



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Carpinteria boasts California's broadest ban on single-use bags. It doesn't just bar getting plastic at the grocery store or other larger retailers; it's the only place in the state that prohibits paper bags as well. By contrast, the proposed state ban on bags—which voters are being asked to approve by the referendum known as Proposition 67—prohibits only single-use plastic bags and allows people to get their groceries in a paper bag for 10 cents a pop.

The debate over plastic bags may seem like a narrow policy question on whether the benefits of keeping plastic bags out of the environment outweigh the inconvenience of having to bring your own reusable bags to the grocery store. But the

bag ban is actually part of a much broader story about how, even in the grandest of states, it's still possible for a few individuals in a small place to make an outsized difference.

The roots of the bag ban in Carp (as some locals weary of saying the five-syllable name call their town) lie in the 1990s recession. As vacancies in the small downtown rose and graffiti became more common, several residents incorporated the all-volunteer Carpinteria Beautiful civic organization. Then, as now, it had no dues and no rules for members. It started with graffiti removal and then took on all kinds of local projects, from litter pickups and bus bench painting, to maintenance of the millstone fountain in Seaside Park and the Linden Beach Ping-Pong table.

Carpinteria Beautiful and other groups were active in environmental causes, including fighting to protect Carp's distinctive seaside bluffs from development. The interest in plastic bags dates to 2007, when Santa Barbara City College students and faculty presented at a City Council meeting on the environmental problems caused by plastic bags ending up in Carp's creeks and the ocean. Other Californian coastal cities were pursuing bag bans, but Carp's city government was wary of the high legal costs of defending the city against inevitable litigation from bag manufacturers. Carpinteria Beautiful, instead, began a community campaign to encourage citizens to switch voluntarily to reusable grocery bags; it won some converts, but not as many as a ban would.

In 2011, the conversation changed. The local Albertsons grocery store was undergoing renovations to make the store greener, in everything from lighting to refrigeration, so its manager Ahmed Jahadhmy, a longtime Carp resident, announced that Albertsons would go "bagless" and worked to convince people to switch to reusable bags. Fortuitously, the California Supreme Court a few months later found for the city of Manhattan Beach in a lawsuit over its own bag ban; that gave Carpinteria the confidence to enact a ban in 2012.

The impact was clear. Volunteers who pre-ban had found 40 to 50 plastic bags during creek clean-ups were now finding one or two.

“The beauty of it was the community,” said Jahadhmy. “The people here are just so understanding and patient, and all the groups and the businesses in Carpinteria were involved in the whole process.” (Word of Carp’s green Albertsons has spread beyond the town and the state, to the powers that be in Washington—the store has received visitors from the U.S. Department of Energy and even the White House.)

Locals say the ban —and all the other beautification work—renewed the city and created momentum for tougher fights, including against an effort to permit new oil drilling in Carpinteria. Going forward, the success of the ban could provide momentum to efforts to introduce commercial composting, improve water quality, and get the city government of Carpinteria certified as a green business.

As California debates whether to approve the single-use bag ban statewide, the picture can seem complicated. It doesn’t help that there’s a second bags-related measure, Prop. 65, which involves where the fees consumers pay for paper and reusable bags go but was put on the ballot by the plastic bag industry to create voter confusion about Prop. 67, the referendum on the statewide bag ban. And with so many municipalities having followed Carp’s lead —by one count, there are 122 local ordinances covering 151 jurisdictions banning single-use plastic bags in the state— Californians have varying experiences with such bans.

So why not keep it simple and think only of that beach city south of Santa Barbara? What, after all, could possibly be wrong with making California a little bit more like Carp?

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