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Tim Shestek: Clearing Up 'Myth-Information' About Plastic Bags

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By **Tim Shestek**

Instead of bans, taxes and surveys, Santa Barbara should help residents reduce, reuse and recycle

Few topics engender such "myth-information" as plastic bags and the environment ([Noozhawk, "Santa Barbara Council Gives the OK to Research Voter Survey on Bag Tax"](#)). And, unfortunately, misinformation can lead to misinformed policy.



Tim Shestek

Case in point: When San Francisco banned the use of plastic grocery bags, most shoppers simply switched to paper bags. Little did they know that plastic bags require 70 percent less energy to manufacture, produce 50 percent less greenhouse gas emissions and create five times less waste than bulky paper bags. The result? San Francisco unwittingly increased energy use, greenhouse gases and waste.

Regardless, many California jurisdictions continue to propose bans on plastic carryout bags. Now, the city of Santa Barbara is looking to spend taxpayer dollars (up to \$50,000, according to the article) to survey whether voters want to impose a tax on themselves for choosing store-provided bags at the checkout.

Readers' opinions were abundantly clear as expressed in their comments on the [Noozhawk](#) article and in Noozhawk's poll of its readers: Santa Barbara doesn't need an expensive poll or a new tax.

Many Santa Barbara residents and Californians across the state apparently are taking a simpler approach: Reduce, reuse, recycle. Even the [city's "Where's Your Bag?" campaign](#) encourages shoppers to do precisely that.

How? Nearly every major retailer sells inexpensive reusable bags, so consumers can easily pick up a reusable bag on any shopping trip, and then they can bring their own. Ninety percent of consumers

already reuse plastic grocery bags at home to pack their kids' lunches, to line their trash cans and to clean up after their dogs. And with innovative new recycling programs spanning the state, consumers can return any leftover plastic bags to grocery stores for recycling.

A recent state law requires large grocers to offer recycling bins for plastic checkout bags — plus dry-cleaning bags, newspaper bags and plastic wraps from bread, paper towels, cases of soda and more. Plastic bag makers are partnering with retailers and recyclers to give these products another life as durable backyard decking, home-building products, city park benches and new plastic bags.



Rapidly growing infrastructure has helped the recycling of plastic bags and wraps grow 27 percent nationwide since 2005, and growth is expected to continue as a result of new state laws such as California's combined with innovative recycling programs.

If Santa Barbara wants to keep plastic bags out of the waste stream, perhaps the city could look into a recently enacted law in Madison, Wis. This forward-looking city has simply barred clean plastic bags from municipal garbage. Residents who choose plastic bags can return them to local grocery stores or one of 10 municipal drop-off points to be recycled. In addition to diverting this valuable material from the waste stream, the law increases the supply of reclaimed plastic, which is in high demand in California and across the country.

No bans, no taxes, no surveys. Madison residents are asked simply to do what many already are doing — returning their bags to the store that provided them.

Plastic bag makers affiliated with the [American Chemistry Council](#), which represents more than 80 percent of plastic bag production in the United States and some plastic bag recyclers, fully support efforts to increase the recycling of plastic bags. Contrary to information attributed in Noozhawk's article, the American Chemistry Council hasn't been a party to lawsuits to prevent bans on plastic bags.

Instead, we work with local partners to educate shoppers about the importance of efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle plastic bags and product wraps — something many Santa Barbara residents already have proved willing to do.

— *Tim Shestek is the director of state and local public affairs for the [American Chemistry Council](#).*

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