

We're All 'Aints' Now

By Jon Coupal

Created 07/28/2010 - 08:04

The current NFL champions are the New Orleans Saints. But thirty years ago, they were horrible. The team's play was so embarrassing that when a local sportscaster recommended fans wear bags over their heads at home games, thousands responded. The bag-head protesters became known as the "Aints." The practice of fans wearing bags to express discontent with especially poor performing sports teams has now become a custom throughout the United States.

If the California Legislature were a professional sports franchise, Californians would be reaching for their bags. They would, that is, if they could afford to pay the proposed "bag tax."

That's right; our embarrassing Legislature is working on another way to cost average citizens money.

Assembly Bill 1998 would punish consumers by banning lightweight, convenient plastic grocery bags -- often reused at home as trash bags and to carry lunches to school and work -- and require grocers to offer paper bags at a charge of at least a nickel. The bill allows the charge to go higher. Plastic bag ban backers say the bag "fee" is not a tax, because shoppers can bring their own bags and avoid paying. However, San Francisco, which has a similar ordinance, has not seen a significant increase in reusable bags, just more consumers using paper bags, according to the California Grocers Association.

However, grocers are backing the proposed plastic bag ban, saying that it will resolve regional differences in "bag law." Their views may also be influenced by the fact that they get to keep the profits from the "bag tax." The arguments for the bag ban are centered on the environmental benefits.

But, ironically, AB 1998 would dismantle a state bag recycling program, while continuing to allow plastic bags to be distributed by other businesses. And then there are the trees that will be sacrificed to provide the paper bag alternative, which is hardly an environmental bonus.

Solving the problem of bag trash -- plastic or paper -- is not rocket science and does not require this legislation that would cost California food shoppers an estimated \$1 billion a year. The focus should be placed on recycling. The problem is, not everyone knows that grocery bags are fully recyclable. Many people don't know how or where to recycle bags after a trip to the restaurant, dry cleaner, store or pharmacy. Just like with other recycling efforts, by educating the community and implementing a proactive recycling program, we can positively impact the environment without increasing consumer grocery costs while many Californians are struggling to just keep food on the table.

Apparently, the Legislature would prefer to spend time looking for complex and inconvenient solutions to problems that can be solved more simply, because this allows them to continue to ignore their constitutional obligation to pass a state budget and deal with the \$20 billion deficit.

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