

Viewpoint: What would they ban next?

By Hasso Hering | Posted: Sunday, July 18, 2010 9:00 am

As though we didn't have serious problems, Oregon is once again talking about plastic grocery bags.

Two state senators, Democrat Mark Hass of Beaverton and Republican Jason Atkinson of Central Point, say they will ask the 2011 legislature to ban plastic shopping bags. They also want grocers to charge 5 cents each if customers dare to ask for a paper bag.

In Portland, Mayor Sam Adams is again asking the city commissioners for a ban on plastic bags.

There's been some editorializing about this here before. Plastic trash is said to be accumulating in the oceans, causing trouble for fish and other creatures. So it's easy to have sympathy for banning especially those flimsy bags, which supposedly blow around in the wind and end up in the water.

But just as serious as those hazards — in a different vein and in the long run — is government meddling in how people live and what they must and must not do.

Part of that is because many of us do stupid stuff that indirectly affects the public in the end. We smoke and add to health care costs. We waste energy and cause environmental damage upstream. We consume a lot of petroleum products, which necessitates a huge outflow of wealth to the oil producers. We make that worse buying cheap stuff from overseas because we want to save money, even though we know that we kill domestic jobs every time we do.

But going to a store and expecting to get a bag in which to carry out your purchases — that ranks pretty low on the scale of consumer foolishness. Merchants have been wrapping up people's purchases for a hundred years or more. It is not a crime against nature to rely on that traditional service that commerce provides.

What do the bag-banners want us to do next?

How about this: You go in for a pound of cherries, but there's no bag to put them in? Do they want you to carry them to the check stand in your cupped hands, then put them on the conveyor belt one by one or in a heap?

They're not talking about banning those kind of plastic bags now. But who knows what's next?

Maybe they will want stores to start selling milk in bulk so we can quit losing sleep over all those containers of plastic or coated cardboard. Consumers might be required to bring their own bottles, and somebody would be employed to scoop the milk out of a vat and ladle it out — the way they did in neighborhood shops in postwar Europe in the 1940s.

No, the regulators probably won't go that far. But then again, nobody would have believed that early in the 21st century a state government would consider passing a law that governs how you carry your groceries home.

In short, before we start banning more and more things we do or use, let's take a break and see if something else, other than more regulation, works better.

We live in a sea of plastic, and the trash is a concern. So let's devise better ways of collecting and remaking all that plastic we now throw away.

But let the government quit dreaming up new ways of enacting edicts for everyday life, imposing costs and forcing citizens to toe the line.

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