



# PLASTIC POLLUTION

## TEMPE COUNCILWOMAN HOPES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY STEPHANIE BRAY

For years, plastic bags and the long-term effects these products have on the environment have been a highly discussed topic. Statistics show that the average American goes through 500 plastic bags per year, and each bag is used for an average of only 20 seconds.

Concerned with plastic pollution in Tempe, Councilwoman Lauren Kuby and fellow council members started a work-study group in spring 2015 to explore the idea of a plastic bag ban for the city. However, before she could make a recommendation to the council, Arizona passed Senate Bill 1241, which blocked cities from banning plastic bags.

But there was a problem. In addition to plastic bags, the bill also addressed energy benchmarking.

The Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest filed a lawsuit in September 2015, on behalf of Kuby, stating that the bill was unconstitutional according to the Arizona Constitution, which prohibits double subject bills.

Furthermore, Kuby believed local democracy was at stake. The community and its residents would suffer because the state government was creating local policy.

“Local control is a long-held value in Arizona, and this ban on plastic bag bans hurts the ability of cities and towns to make thoughtful choices that best represent the values and ideals of their residents,” Kuby said. “Shouldn’t cities be able to manage waste without the state stepping in to override local decision making?” she continued.

In January, the state separated Senate Bill 1241 into two separate bills, but the lawsuit remains in the hands of the Maricopa Superior Court.

Tempe isn’t the first city to bring up this issue. On Earth Day 2014, Bisbee was the first Arizona city to enact a plastic

bag ban. Washington D.C. passed a five-cent bag fee in 2010 for disposable paper and plastic bags. Three years later, San Francisco passed a 10-cent bag fee. Even back in 2008, Ireland passed a plastic bag tax, and within weeks, there was a 94 percent drop in plastic bag use.

Kuby believes plastic bags are a gateway issue. Her reasoning: At first, people might not understand the issue, or they may believe the government is interfering with their freedom to use specific products. But most people come to embrace it, and they want to know other things they can do to lead a sustainable life.

“Banning plastic bags has a definite, direct effect on the amount of single-use plastic in the waste stream,” Kuby said. “It saves money for consumers; it saves money for cities.”

Since filing the lawsuit, Kuby has focused on community outreach by teaching people how to properly recycle. She also encourages people to refuse single-use plastic products like straws, bags or bottles.

“The very least a business can do is not give a straw [or bag] but wait for someone to ask for one,” Kuby said. “It’s very rare that you need a straw to drink water in a restaurant. It’s really more the to-go cups that require that. So we just encourage people to reduce, reuse, recycle, and to refuse single-use plastic.”

In the future, Kuby hopes more restaurants and supermarkets voluntarily give up single-use plastic bags and become “champions” of reusable bags.

Take Whole Foods, for example. When customers bring in their own bags, the company will rebate up to 10 cents each at the register. Similarly, Sprouts gives a 5-cent rebate for every bag its customers bring in. Dozens of other businesses



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– LAUREN KUBY



have incorporated similar rewards for customers who bring their own bags, and even sell reusable bags for a small fee that customers can purchase at the register. These practices help keep plastic bag use down, but we still have a long way to go to fully remove plastic bags from our everyday lives.

**What Can We Do?**

On average, it takes 20 to 1,000 years for a plastic bag to decompose. So what can we do to help? Here are a few suggestions:

- If you have a pet, purchase and use biodegradable doggie waste bags (or keep an eye out for them at your local dog park).
- Invest in reusable shopping bags. Keep them in the backseat of your car so you don't forget them the next time you go shopping.
- Hold onto your bread bags and use them to wrap sandwiches in.
- Buying frozen fruits or veggies? The packaging can double as a cutting surface thanks to the bag's thicker material.
- Tell cashiers at the point of sale you do not need a plastic bag if you are buying one or two items and can easily carry them without a bag.
- Be more mindful in general of the amount of single-use products you're using, and try to cut back.
- Inspire your friends, family, colleagues and fellow humans to do the same. 🌱

Stephanie Bray is an aspiring magazine writer. In May 2015, she graduated from the University of Missouri with a Bachelor of Journalism.

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