

Paper, Plastic? ACE Hopes The New Norm Is: Neither

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Staff Writer

Paper, or plastic? The correct answer is: Neither!

Arlingtonians for a Clean Environment (ACE) will spend part of October pressing local residents to take reusable bags with them when shopping, avoiding the necessity to bring home plastic or paper bags.

"This is an issue that's caught on — I've seen the public interest spark," said Elenor Hodges, executive director of ACE.

"It's becoming more common" to see shoppers toting reusable canvas bags with them as they make their rounds, she said.

In partnership with Giant Food, ACE plans to present a week's worth of activities from Oct. 19-25, designed to raise awareness. They are calling it the "BYOBAG Campaign," which will build on the inaugural effort, held last year.

Volunteers are being sought to help staff tables at local Giant stores during the campaign, which will educate the public about the environmental damage done by single-use plastic bags that aren't properly recycled.

(Those interested can call 703-228-7231 or see the Web site at www.arlingtonenvironment.org for information on volunteering.)

ACE volunteers often find plastic bags as the single largest type of trash floating in local waterways, Hodges said.

Not only are plastic bags unhealthy for the environment, but paper bags also are problematic — maybe even more so, depending on how you gauge the environmental impact of each.

"Reusable is better than both," Hodges said.

Last fall, County Board members went on record supporting restrictions on single-use bags by super-

markets and other stores, citing environmental issues.

The ban they suggested would have been even more sweeping than one enacted by San Francisco authorities in 2007.

That ban, the first of its kind in the nation, applied only to large supermarkets and chain stores, while Arlington officials were thinking even more broadly.

But unlike California communities, Virginia's localities do not have the power to enact such rules on their own.

And, even as they were proposing the measure, Arlington officials acknowledged how difficult it would be to get the state legislature on board.

In this year's General Assembly session, Del. Adam Ebbin (D-45th) introduced legislation to impose a fee of 5 cents on most paper and plastic bags used when checking out.

The Ebbin bill did not make it out of committee, nor did a measure by state Sen. Patsy Ticer (D-31st), which would have prohibited retailers from offering single-use plastic carryout bags.

County Board Vice Chairman Jay Fisette said the effort could continue in next year's session of the legislature.

"I think there will be a renewed effort in the General Assembly to reduce the use of plastic bags and encourage reusable bags," he said. "While it hasn't passed, there has been bipartisan support. Many legislators with rivers in their districts, and in districts that border the Chesapeake Bay, especially see the need."

"Education should continue simultaneously, promoting reusable bags and, when you do use plastic, to recycle those bags," Fisette said.

Earlier this year, the county government's recycling program was expanded to include single-use plastic bags.