

City council discusses plastic bag usage survey

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Potential littering solutions include banning bags, switching materials

The Gallup City Council discussed the results of a survey about the potential regulation of single-use plastic bags July 9, during its recent regular meeting.

The survey, hosted on SurveyMonkey by the City of Gallup's legal department, asked a number of questions concerning the issues that other local communities have voiced in regards to the use of plastic bags.

One hundred twenty six responses were recorded, according to the meeting agenda.

City Attorney Curtis Hayes said the survey was conducted to ensure that a potential ordinance regulating single-use plastic bags received adequate public feedback before enactment.

"We wanted the survey questions to be neutral, but also informative," Hayes said.

The first survey question stated that a number of cities and states have banned the use of single-use high density polyethylene plastic bags by most businesses. Arguments in favor of

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these bans include plastic bags being a large portion of visible litter, and that they are rarely recycled and harmful to birds and marine life.

On the other side of that questions, arguments against these bans state, high-density polyethylene bags constitute less than one percent of landfill waste, and alternatives, such as heavy plastic or paper bags, cost more than HDPE bags, but are also likely to end up as visible litter.

Of the 126 responses, 73 percent were in favor of the City of Gallup banning HDPE single-use bags for most businesses.

The second question asked if the City of Gallup should require retailers with more than 10,000 square feet of space to take in plastic bags for recycling. Out of 124 responses, 53 percent said yes.

The third question involved the use of single-use bioplastic bags made from starches or polylactic acid instead of HDPE. Despite being made from renewable materials, bioplastic bags carry the same benefits and drawbacks of HDPE bags, according to the survey.

Out of 126 responses, 70 percent said the City of Gallup should not require large retailers to use bioplastic bags instead of HDPE bags.

Dist. 2 Councilor Allan Landavazo asked how the change of material could affect the litter currently strewn across the countryside.

“A possible issue is the new material may not break down like the current material,” Hayes said.

However, Hayes said bags made from a different material may be more likely to be reused or disposed of in other ways.

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The fourth question asked if certain businesses should be exempt from a potential ban on plastic bags. These businesses include restaurants, non-profit organizations, or farmers' markets. Of the 71 answers, 45 percent said restaurants should be exempt. Thirty-four percent said non-profits should be exempt. Twenty-one percent said farmers' markets should be exempt.

Survey takers were free to comment personally on the fourth question. Here's what they said:

Reusable bags across the board.

None - all should be required to use alternatives like paper.

None. No bags PERIOD!!!

No exemptions. Ban plastic bags!

All. For the love of God, please don't ban plastic bags.

The fifth survey question asked if certain types of products should be exempt from the plastic bag ban. Of 80 responses, 63 percent said food products should be exempt, 21 percent said laundry products, 15 percent said pharmacy products, and one percent said alcohol should be exempt.

This question also allowed user comments, some of which included:

America did quite well without plastics.

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None.

Why ban bags, why not ban all the trash thrown on the road like beer cartons!

All of these.

The last two questions asked if the customer should either be charged a fee or tax at the time of sale for a bag or container provided by the retailer. The fee would be 10 cents, while the tax was not specified in the survey.

Survey takers were split on the notion of a 10-cent fee, with 51 percent of users saying “no,” while 49 percent of users said “yes.”

As for a tax, users were less receptive to the idea. Sixty-five percent of responses turned it down, while 35 percent gave their consent.

Dist. 4 Councilor Fran Palochak said there is already a system of paying extra for plastic bags in place in Santa Fe, and that most people are happy to go along with it, at first.

“Then they get into the groove of it and start bringing their bags,” she said.

She added that while you do pay an extra fee at stores like Dillard’s, you’re getting thicker bags.

“People will adapt to what you make,” Palochak said, of new types of bags being made available.

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Despite the possible solutions presented by the survey, Mayor Jackie McKinney said the city council should not be in the business of dictating what is being sold or the price that is set.

“I don’t want to get into the kind of government that’s mandating the private sector,” he said.

McKinney said the problem goes beyond whether or not retailers provide bags.

“The problem is we live in a society that throws all their trash on the streets,” he said.

To this end, he added a potential solution would be to educate the public on the consequences of littering and get them to change how they dispose of their trash.

“We should concentrate on what the big issue is: the trash in our community and what residents do about it,” McKinney said.

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