Miami’s plastic vice: Bagging the ban on bag bans

South Florida businesses and environmentalists fight political battle over state rule outlawing plastic bag prohibition

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MIAMI BEACH, Florida — Miami Beach markets itself as having 9 miles of glittering, hot, white sandy beaches in a southern Florida tourist haven that delights locals and visitors alike. But sometimes the reality can be a little different.

On some weekends, it can be hard to escape stepping on mounds of discarded plastic bags, bottles, cigarette butts and food wrappers. “I can’t go to the beach anymore because I end up cleaning up,” said Dave Doebler, a member of Miami Beach’s Sustainability Committee, which is tasked with providing long- and short-term goals for the city’s strategic plan regarding environmental and economic concerns.

“Last week, we pulled 800 pounds of trash off the shoreline during one of our beach cleanups. It’s not just Miami Beach either. It’s all over, in Biscayne Bay, and all up and down the coast,” Doebler added.
The worst trash strewn along the shoreline: plastic bags. Not only are they unsightly, but their impact is hard to miss, especially along waterways, where they harm land and marine wildlife, clog flood control systems, interfere with landfill operations and breed mosquitoes. The United Nations recently released two reports with conservative financial estimates for worldwide marine damage from plastics: $13 billion each year.

The harsh environmental impact of plastic bags has spurred a movement to eliminate them. From Hawaii to cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and most recently Chicago, over 160 state and local governments have passed plastic bag bans. There is often a small fee, up to 10 cents in some areas, to encourage reusable bags.

The elected officials of Miami Beach say they would like to have a plastic bag ban of their own. But they can’t, because it’s illegal in Florida to ban plastic bags.

In 2008, the Florida Legislature passed a law that denied local governments the opportunity to enact plastic bag laws. The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) subsequently created a list of recommendations based on a 2010 Retail Bags Report, ensuring that the Legislature could enact no new bag rules unless it followed the DEP guidelines. The DEP regulatory strategy discouraged single-use plastic and paper bags, and noted that outright bans produced the fastest results — closely followed by plans that impose user fees or taxes.

But getting Florida’s politicians to agree on a law allowing the banning of plastic bags has not been easy, not least because of opposition from some members of the business community. So Florida’s ban on the bans remains in place.

Some local leaders are trying to change that. This past legislative session, there was a bill that would have removed the prohibition on municipalities regulating plastic bags and requiring that new ordinances be uniform throughout the state. It was the second attempt by state Sen. Dwight Bullard — a Democrat representing a district mostly surrounded by water — to introduce a bill with a 10-cent fee for paper bags to offset costs for stores mandated to make the switch from plastic.

But at the Senate committee hearing, Samantha Padgett of the Florida Retail Federation called the bill an unnecessary paper bag tax.

"We have a public information campaign that tells people where they can take plastic bags to recycle. Plastic bags also have a place in the green building market," she said. Padgett cited their use in making decking materials, park benches and landscape dividers. Among other things, a ban would mean 100 fewer jobs at Hilex Poly, a plastic bag manufacturer with plants in Jacksonville and Orlando.
The bill was temporarily postponed in committee, primarily because lawmakers “started throwing around the ugly T word in government,” said Bullard, referring to “tax.” The state senator is undecided on whether he will eventually remove the fee on the bill.

I don’t think the naysayers would be satisfied either way. There is no brouhaha or riot in the streets going to happen because people are asked to pay an additional 10 cents for a processing fee,” said Bullard. “There is a level of ignorance in Tallahassee towards the national trend. This is not an overly cumbersome thing. Certain retailers are actually asking for this.”

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— Dwight Bullard
Florida state senator

For years, the finger-pointing about the cause of the litter problem in Miami Beach focused on the tourists. Grassroots organizations such as the Surfrider Foundation (http://www.surfrider.org/programs/entry/rise-above-plastics) and Ecomb (http://ecomb.org/), which have been trying to get the city to improve the condition of coastal waterways, now feel they have elected officials who are listening.

But, despite being unable to ban plastic bags outright, Miami Beach authorities are taking baby steps to enforce environmental regulations. This summer, the county will install recycling bins on the beaches for the first time, and starting in November, the city will enforce mandatory recycling programs for businesses and for condominiums larger than eight units. Currently, plastic straws and disposable coolers made of polystyrene, commonly known as Styrofoam, are prohibited on the beaches — but that has barely decreased the amount of trash.

“We’ve been really lax in protecting our beaches and waterways. We’ve been behind the eight ball when it comes to recycling,” said Miami Beach Commissioner Michael Grieco. “Now we’re making a decision to address this issue.”

But, unable to take on the plastic bag issue, the closest the city can get to remove nonbiodegradable, petroleum-based litter is to focus on polystyrene. In mid-June, Grieco introduced a resolution to ban city contractors from using polystyrene products. Eventually, there are hopes to expand the ban citywide.

“McDonald’s and Starbucks don’t use it. Dunkin’ Donuts is phasing it out. It’s time we grow up and get with the program,” said Grieco. "Since statutes clearly pre-empt municipalities from banning plastic bags, we met with our city attorney to think how we can ban polystyrene. Let the retail association sue us if they have a problem with it."

Dozens of cities have already banned polystyrene containers, such as clamshell-shaped take out food boxes, packing peanuts and foam coffee cups. Although the material maintains heat and is cost-effective for the food industry, it contains styrene and benzene, suspected carcinogens and neurotoxins. It easily breaks apart into small pieces that are extremely difficult to clean up and remain in the environment for at least 500 years, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (http://www.epa.gov/ogw/contaminants/carcinogens.html).

“In terms of quantity, it’s not as much as plastic bags. But in terms of toxicity, absolutely. We’re focusing on the low-hanging fruit,” said Scott Stripling, chairman of the Miami chapter of the Surfrider Foundation. “In this case, we’re going to focus on polystyrene.”
Why is it that we hear this kind of story time and time again? Why is it that corporate profit always comes before the protection of nature and the wellbeing of communities? Who decided is should be this way?

This article is typical of the massive campaign to ban plastic shopping bags. Filled with Internet myths collected from Google. Why not READ an Environmental Impact Study to find out if the myths are true or false. The latest was produced by the UK Environmental Agency. It is titled "Life Cycle Assessment of Supermarket Carrier Bags". It took years and reviews every scientific factor for all types of bags used to carry food home. Guess what? The answer is obvious. The claim about 800 lbs of cleanup sounds awful. Plastic bags are 0.6 percent or 0.006 lb. per lb. of liter nationwide. So 800 lbs. would contain 4.8 lbs of plastic bags. Plastic bags rarely killed marine wild life. The claim that 100,000’s of sea turtles are killed by plastic bags was a misquote from a fisherman in Newfoundland and became an internet sensation. A fraud. Ask for autopsy reports. The plastic garbage patch in the Pacific only contains trash bags from passing ships, so few in fact that surveys rarely find any. The plastic trash is water bottles, molding pellets, and massive fishing nets that kill huge number of marine life. Finally the big ONE. Plastic shopping bag bans Increase bag production and plastic waste into landfills. That is what Ireland discovered after their bag ban. Bag manufacturers had to add 300 jobs for the increased production. Ban a 6 gram shopping bag that is universally reused for household trash and customers have to buy 18 gram trash bags that generate far higher profit margins for bag companies. Become educated by reading all of the scientific EIS and Life Cycle Assessments.
The Heartland Institute is an American conservative and libertarian[2] public policy think tank based in Chicago. In the 1990s, the group worked with the tobacco company Philip Morris to question serious cancer risks to secondhand smoke, and to lobby against government public-health reforms.[12][13][14] More recently, the Institute has focused on questioning the science of human-caused climate change, and was described by the New York Times as "the primary American organization pushing climate change skepticism."

The Heartland Institute does not disclose its funding sources but Wikipedia has some information about this and all of the funding comes from conservative groups.

On May 4, 2012, the Heartland Institute launched a digital billboard ad campaign in the Chicago area featuring a photo of Ted Kaczynski, (the "Unabomber" whose mail bombs killed three people and injured 23 others), and asking the question, "I still believe in global warming, do you?"[30] The institute planned for the campaign to feature murderer Charles Manson, communist leader Fidel Castro and perhaps Osama bin Laden, asking the same question but they canceled the campaign when Rep. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.), to threaten to cancel his speech at the upcoming Heartland Institute Climate Change Conference.

Get a more credible source.

Perhaps you should become educated on the report that you sited...

"A report commissioned by the Environment Agency shows that commonly-used plastic ‘bags for life’, if used four or more times, will have a lower carbon footprint than single-use carrier bags." Further, the Discussion portion of the study concludes that "The study clearly shows that production of 1000 traditional plastic vest-bags causes a more pronounced negative impact on environmental and human health than the same number of biodegradable ones."


Also, "bags for life" are reusable shopping bags, or totes, not the single-use plastic shopping bags to which you refer.
Hi Jack Wilkerson - I am the guy highlighted in the story. Out of the 800 pounds of trash we picked up off the shoreline of the bay, we do pick up on average of 75-100 plastic bags in a one block distance. Please keep in mind we are NOT doing these cleanups on the beaches, but the bay which is not where people are hanging out - and the trash we pick up is what washes up from the waters. While your weight calculation does seem reasonable, it is the sheer volume of single use plastics in general (including Styrofoam) and a general lack of concern with our ‘disposable’ society that is my issue. The root of the issue is that people are not being responsible with their waste and for their actions. They litter all over the place, it goes into the storm drain systems (or is blown straight into the bay), which then goes basically unfettered into the bay and ocean. I am personally not advocating for a ban on plastic bags, but do believe that we should not allow a retailer to give away plastic bags for free. My thought process is that a retailer and consumer will change behavior if their bag costs them $.05. If they want it, they will pay for it - and likely use it a second time and make sure it goes into the trash. If they don’t want to pay $.05 per bag, then they will refuse it and carry that single item by hand or bring their own bags. I don’t believe you are being disingenuous with your thoughts, but as a guy who goes out and spends 5 hours every weekend cleaning up the single use plastics out of the water, I see it first hand. I don’t have some big agenda - except for seeing a real problem and trying to raise awareness so we can solve it. No one can tell me that plastic floating in the water is a good thing, or has no negative impacts. I encourage you to look at my work and research at www.volunteercleanup.org (go on the news section for y presentations) or on my FB site (just search for volunteercleanup). I would also love for you to take a look for yourself just by looking down. Most people don’t see it until they look or attend a cleanup. If you have an alternative way to address the single use plastic waste that is swirling around in the bay and oceans of a first world country, then I am all open. PS - the plastic bags I am picking up are not coming from passing ships, since they don’t have a walmart, publix, or CVS in the middle of the Atlantic.

Our tourists from Europe are horrified by our lack of recycle and continued toxic waste products. Rightly so. Finally we are realizing how embarrassing our contempt for garbage disposal is. We are an International destination, finally we’re beginning to behave like one.

You’re right. When I travel through countries of the world, even countries that are fully modern, there’s no litter scattered all over the place like you see in the US.

However, I have found the UK to be a bit untidy due to litter. But no where near the problems of the US.

I guess a lot of the problem comes from being a fast food nation, where the average single takeaway meal is stuffed into several different containers and packages.

The fast food industry should be paying a tax to cover the cost of cleaning up their branded wrappings from public places.
"What is wrong with people to leave their trash behind? Some say that we are civilized compared with other nations. Leaving one's trash and not cleaning it up for others to clean up is not civilized. Besides it hurts animals and the entire environment.

And with the US leading the way in trash depositing, you can extrapolate the proportional number of trash living in the US, by using your statement as formula.

I don't know anyone who says that the US is civilized compared to other nations. I take it that you are only mixing with Americans.

"Among other things, a ban would mean 100 fewer jobs at Hilex Poly, a plastic bag manufacturer with plants in Jacksonville and Orlando."

If I hear this "jobs" excuse with regards to environmental protection initiatives one more time, I think my head will explode. Let's do the math here. 100 jobs in Florida, or billions of lives around the planet? Which is more important? Could we be any more short-sighted? Could our reason be any more flawed? There's literally a floating pile of plastic garbage roughly the size of Texas swirling around in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and we're sitting here arguing about whether potentially losing 100 jobs is worth it to protect the planet from literally being overrun with plastic garbage. A plastic bag ban should have happened decades ago, and yet here we are in 2014, continuing to destroy the planet and arguing that it's better to save precious jobs than to think about the long-term future of humanity, the planet, and everything else that lives on it.
Stop the food tax

29 days ago

If you read the report they cite and then go to the people behind that report you will see that they advocate recycling. Not banning. The plastic bag has a smaller footprint. If you really want to save the earth then recycling should be your cry. A study put out by the reasoning foundation is very thorough and shows how banning the bag is just a feel good legislation that is not even based on facts.

Google

29 days ago

Unfortunately, your theory relies on people taking their rubbish home with them to recycle. And as we can clearly see, this is not happening. Or otherwise we wouldn’t be talking about the problem.

And it hasn’t happened for 40 years, even though we have been fully aware of the severe negative impact to wildlife and the environment.

The only way is to ban plastic bag use. I doubt that the culture would go underground as a result. We’re not talking about drugs here.

Jason Coleman

28 days ago

Agreed. In the end, he is suggesting we could enjoy these extra liberties by taking personal responsibility for them afterward. The whole reason the US is becoming a “nanny state” is that its “children” want freedom but also decline to be responsible for those said freedoms, much like small children.
Two American doctors are now infected and U.S. officials are urging travelers to be vigilant.

Chemotherapy is big business, but a Stanford program is offering an alternative to expensive, painful overtreatment.

Since 2009, over 220,000 new jobs are available in the restaurant industry.