

Council debates plastic bag issue

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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Mayor wants to hear more community feedback

The Gallup City Council is considering implementing a plastic bag ordinance to address pollution on city streets.

The issue was raised at the past two regular meetings of the City Council and due to limited input from the community, a public hearing on the single use bag ordinance was held June 12.

City attorney Curtis Hayes shared a PowerPoint presentation outlining the pros and cons of the ordinance.

“The city of Santa Fe uses a fee system, the purpose of which is to encourage people to bring their own bags because they’re being charged by the retailer if they have to use a retailer provided bag,” he said.

If there is a fee system, where should the fee go? he asked.

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The tariff could go to the retailer to compensate for cost of heavy-duty bags or to the city for educational campaigns and to provide reasonable bags to its citizens.

Proponents argue that single use bags are a large part of visible litter; they are rarely recycled; are harmful to birds and marine life; and alternatives are economical and less likely to become litter.

Opponents say single use, high intensity polyethylene bags are recyclable, and plastic bags are less than one percent of landfill waste. Overall, they believe there's not enough negative impact to justify a ban, and the alternatives are more expensive and also end up as litter.

Mayor Jackie McKinney said the proposed ordinance is not new and has been debated for some years.

"This Council has discussed it. If it was ever brought for decision it was always tabled," he said. "We are concerned with the complaints and what we recognize is the trash in the community."

McKinney stressed that it wasn't a decision-making meeting, but an opportunity for the council to hear some alternatives.

"We would appreciate any input, pro or con," he said. "Our former city attorney researched this, as much as six years ago."

Katherine Babcock spoke first and said she witnessed firsthand the changes in her former community in California after a plastic bag ban was implemented.

"I lived there for 20 years. The change was shocking," she said, encouraging councilors to pass the ordinance.

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Ruth Hood, a longtime Gallup resident also supported the ban and said such a measure was imposed in Kenya, when she lived in the east African country.

The measure to ban plastic bags in Kenya took three times before it was finally passed after a multi-pronged approach involving business owners, residents and the government.

“If we were to do anything unilaterally, it would be very stupid. Zuni and Window Rock use bags,” Hood said.

Alice Perez, executive director of the Community Pantry, said she supports the ban.

She noted that they use 200-250 bags per day on average for customers.

“I understand the need for the ban and I support it,” she said. “It is what it is.”

Bill Lee, CEO of the Gallup McKinley Chamber of Commerce said he was speaking on behalf of businesses in the Chamber.

“This is a tough issue. I don’t envy your position here. From the Chamber side, we’d like to partner,” he said, adding that a survey could be helpful.

Neil Butler came up to speak just before discussions concluded.

Butler said the scheduled timeframe for the meeting made it difficult for business owners to leave their place of work to attend the meeting. However, he made time available to express his opposition to the ordinance.

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“I don’t agree with it. It’s going to impact the business community negatively. There’s a whole lot of things that don’t make sense with this ordinance,” he said. “I’ve talked to several business owners throughout town and have not come across one that supports this.”

The Council will continue to receive input and suggestions on the issue.