

Cooperative approach is needed to reduce the use of plastic bags

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



The council's Public Works and Facilities Committee heard the Plastic Bag

Reduction Bill again this week. There was good dialogue on several points. But there was confusion about which version of the bill was being addressed, and some remarks implied businesses/retailers are the crux of the problem. For us on the business/retail front, this issue is about the best way to accomplish the objective, and we resubmitted testimony with our bill suggestions.

Many businesses have stepped up to the plate, distributing reusable bags and instituting plastic-bag recycling programs. A "Knot Your Bag" educational campaign also was established statewide to inform residents how they can help prevent plastic bags from taking flight. These efforts are creating a movement that is under way. We all want to reduce litter and protect the environment; we simply have to change old habits.

We at the Maui Chamber of Commerce are continuing to recommend a multifaceted process, including public/private partnerships, reasonable regulation, public education

programs, improved recycling methods, and a phased-in approach to allow business to use up existing plastic-bag stock and implement new systems.

While some invoke the notion that businesses/retailers are central to this challenge — since they distribute the plastic bags, and sometimes too many of them — we can't keep passing the buck. Each of us has used a plastic bag.

Retailers and consumers both had wanted to switch from paper to plastic, since plastic bags hold more, don't break when wet, etc. Many stores still offer paper bags upon request. But few shoppers request them, and businesses respond to consumer needs. Moreover, both paper and plastic bags are harmful to the environment. Reusable bags are the best alternative, and no one has stopped us from using them all these years. Blaming the business sector isn't helpful; altering behavior and switching to reusable bags, readily available throughout Maui, is.

What will it take to make the switch to reusable bags? That's a key question. Some feel it's best done with a carrot, others recommend a stick. Around the globe, some countries heavily penalize businesses that distribute plastic bags, while others charge the consumers who use the plastic bags. We believe the real solution lies in education, new practices, a lit-

tle time and a comprehensive strategy.

As council members reviewed the bill, they discussed:

- Bill administration. The current bill — which after some confusion was determined to be the one on the county Web site, www.co.maui.hi.us — states that the director of the Office of Environmental Management will be responsible for administering this chapter of law and is required to develop the administrative rules within 180 days. Many acknowledged that this is a new department and a new program, and there are still issues to be worked out. For example, the additional dollars and staff to handle these expanded responsibilities are not included in this year's budget.

- Enforcement. Businesses with gross annual revenues of \$250,000 or more would have to stop providing nonbiodegradable plastic checkout bags at the point of sale immediately after the bill becomes law. Those with less than \$250,000 gross annual revenues would have five years before having to meet the requirement.

- Stakeholder involvement. We've asked that business concerns be addressed and that a public/private partnership be developed. The Office of Economic Development (OED) shared it is working to ensure all stakeholders have a say. We eagerly await the OED plan.

- Small-business definition.

For consistency, OED recommends the Small Business Administration's definition of small business, which is \$500,000 in annual gross revenues instead of the current \$250,000 from the San Francisco model. The lower number was proposed to increase early participation for a broader impact. Yet, many expressed the need to work with small businesses and said consistent definitions are important. We agree and support raising the revenue amount from \$250,000 to \$500,000.

- Time frame for implementation. In response to the requirement of an immediate time frame for those who don't meet the small-business definition, it was suggested to allow all businesses to prepare for this change within 12 to 24 months from the date the bill is enacted.

- Plastic-bag reduction, not elimination. There are still plastic bags not covered in this bill that will fill the landfill, litter our streets, reach the ocean, etc.

Working cooperatively as well as taking individual responsibility, we are making better choices, reducing plastic-bag use and moving our environmental goals forward. There's no blame, just more work to be done. Let's keep it up.

■ Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.