Foes Say IL Plastic Bag Recycling Law Won't Work

Tammy Webber, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Environmentalists are urging Gov. Pat Quinn to veto a bill that would require manufacturers of plastic bags to set up collection and recycling programs, calling it a ploy by industry to do an end run around communities that want to adopt more stringent recycling or reduction programs — or ban the ubiquitous bags altogether.

The proposed law would require plastic bag manufacturers to set up recycling programs with the goal of increasing the recycling rate by 12 percent by 2015 and to eventually make bags from at least 30 percent recycled content. It also would require manufacturers to register with and present plans to the state by next July; retail stores then could use bags only from registered manufacturers.

Max Muller, program director at Environment Illinois, said the recycling goals are paltry but still probably wouldn't be met. What really irks him and some local elected officials, however, is that the bill would prohibit individual communities from enacting their own laws, which Muller said would do far more to reduce litter and environmental harm from bags.

"The bill is dolled up as a statewide recycling program ... but proponents really want to lock the state into using plastic bags," said Muller. "I don't believe this bill is going to accomplish a thing."

Plastic bag manufacturers and the Illinois Retail Merchants Association support the bill. Quinn, a Democrat, must decide this summer whether to sign it.

Champaign Mayor Don Gerard said his City Council was considering a fee or ban on plastic bags — and had received no objections from store owners — when the Legislature passed the bill in May.

"I cannot fathom why a special interest group would be working with our state legislators to ... take away the rights of my city government to dictate our programs," he said.

But Tanya Triche, senior counsel for the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, said manufacturers might not be able to meet the recycling goals outlined in the bill if individual communities started banning or charging shoppers a fee for plastic bags.

"We want to make sure customers have choices," she said. "Some want plastic, some want paper and others have reusable plastic bags. Let them make the decision about what is right for their households."

Doug Clay, who manages the recycling program for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's land pollution control division, said the bill also would require

manufacturers to recycle plastic film used for such things as dry cleaning or toilet paper wrapping, which would comprise about 85 percent of the recycled material.

"I think people want to do the right thing," he said. "If you make it easy for them to recycle, then they're more likely to do that."

Muller said environmentalists would not object to the bill if the governor removed the local preemption through an amendatory veto. But because the bill passed with enough votes to override a veto, opponents might have to work to change lawmakers' votes.

On Tuesday, Quinn accepted a petition with 154,000 signatures urging him to veto the measure, gathered online from around the country by 12-year-old Abby Goldberg of Grayslake, who was trying to get her town to ban plastic bags when the Legislature passed the bill.

Quinn said he is reviewing the bill and will "stand up for the environment." He also told Gerard, who joined Abby and several environmental groups, that home rule for Illinois towns was "very, very important."

Muller said he fears that industry will try to use the proposed recycling law as a model for other states as a way to stop cities from adopting their own ordinances.

Dozens of communities nationwide have banned bags — Los Angeles is the largest — or fine customers who use them because of concerns about litter, the use of petroleum products in production and because wildlife can become tangled in or swallow them.

"People across Illinois and the country are looking for solutions to this problem," said Jack Darin, executive director of the Illinois Sierra Club. "I can't think of why you would want to tie the hands of leaders in communities across Illinois."

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