Proposal would recycle plastic bags, not ban them

Business community supports bill; many environmentalists oppose it

By Robert McCoppin and John Keilman, Chicago Tribune reporters

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As several U.S. cities move to ban plastic bags, Illinois is a signature away from its own law to regulate the omnipresent carryout sacks that so often wind up as breeze-borne litter.

But in a twist on the usual reaction to this type of government oversight, the proposal has the backing of the business community but is opposed by many environmental groups.

The plan, approved by state lawmakers last week and awaiting action by Gov. Pat Quinn, would require plastic bag manufacturers to set up collection and recycling programs, pay fees and register with the state. Individual communities — with the exception of Chicago — would be prohibited from enacting their own laws to impose taxes on the use of plastic bags or ban them outright.

Environmentalists, who point to reusable bags as the greener option, say the law would unfairly tie the hands of local governments, which in several West Coast communities have led the way in banning plastic bags.

"It's a wolf in sheep's clothing," said Max Muller, program director for Environment Illinois. "I think we're being scammed."

Sponsors say the program proposed in Illinois would have a bigger impact than varying efforts in a few communities and provide uniformity that would help businesses avoid the logistical headaches of a patchwork of different regulations.

"I think we should be lauded for our efforts instead of having people criticize our efforts," said state Sen. Terry Link, a Vernon Hills Democrat and sponsor of the bill. Like curbside recycling, he said, it will take time for the habit to catch on.

Plastic bags were introduced at grocery store checkout counters in the 1970s and since have become ubiquitous. The Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based environmental group, says global manufacturers create up to 5 trillion plastic bags a year, and Americans throw away 100 billion of them.
The bags became a target of environmentalists because of the fossil fuels used to create them, the litter problem they create and the harm they cause wildlife that swallow or get tangled up in them. Some countries have begun to tax the use of the bags or prohibit them outright.

The number of bag bans nationwide reached 63 last year, by the count of industry trade publication plasticsnews.com. Some laws impose fines of 5 to 20 cents per bag for customers who use them. Last month, Los Angeles became the largest city in the United States to ban plastic bags at supermarket checkout lines, forcing shoppers to bring their own bags or pay 10 cents for a paper bag.

Under the Illinois plan, bag manufacturers would have to register with the state and submit a recycling plan that includes a public education component by July 1, 2013. The manufacturers can include existing retail collection efforts as part of their plans.

The Illinois Environment Protection Agency is charged with overseeing the program, including posting the plans online with a 30-day period for public comment and manufacturer feedback. Each manufacturer is also supposed to file an annual report on the results of their programs starting in 2014.

The goal is to increase the recycling rate by at least 12 percent by 2015. The penalty for failing to comply with the act is a fine of up to $1,000.

Quinn isn't saying whether he'll sign the proposed law or veto it.

The legislation originated with a recommendation by a state task force whose members included lawmakers and retail and plastics officials, with input from the American Chemistry Council. It was based on a test program in Lake County, where health inspectors had complained about the bags blowing out of a landfill.

In 2009, the pilot program recovered 250,000 pounds of plastic film, which the task force considered "highly successful," with a 6 percent increase in plastic wrap collected. Statewide, though, the task force reported, Illinois recycles only 1.5 percent of plastic bags.

The Illinois Retail Merchants Association, a leading lobbying group in the state, initially opposed the recycling requirement.

But as the threat of local government bans mounted, some trade groups encouraged their members to support the legislation as a less stringent alternative to outright bans. The cities of Evanston and Champaign both considered fees or bans, and Highland Park created its own plastic bag recycling program, which would be grandfathered into the new bill.

One official who has spearheaded local recycling efforts, Highland Park Ald. Steven Mandel, said the state proposal is a step in the right direction to reduce plastic in landfills. Highland Park looked at a ban several years ago, but officeholders were unwilling to enact it.

"From my experience in Highland Park with plastic bags, I don't think it's politically feasible in Illinois," he said. "You can ask for the sky and a perfect world, or you can look to reality."