



COMMUNITY & NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES

February 23, 2010

The Community & Neighborhood Services Committee of the City of Mesa met in the lower level meeting room of the Council Chambers, 57 East 1st Street, on February 23, 2010 at 4:27 p.m.

COMMITTEE PRESENT

Dina Higgins, Chairwoman
Dennis Kavanaugh
Dave Richins

COMMITTEE ABSENT

None

STAFF PRESENT

Alfred Smith
Natalie Lewis

(Items were discussed out of order, but for purposes of clarity will remain as listed on the agenda.)

1. Items from citizens present.

There were no items from citizens present.

2. Hear a presentation by Rhodes Junior High students and faculty and discuss the results of a "Project Citizen" research effort related to the overall impact of the use of plastic bags in Mesa.

Chairwoman Higgins welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Committeemember Kavanaugh stated that he was recently invited to Rhodes Junior High School to speak to Jeff Anderson's 8th grade Social Studies class, which is participating in the "Project Citizen" program. He explained that the section of the class that will address the Committee has worked on a project researching the effects of plastic bags, how they harm the environment, and what other communities are doing to address the problem. Committeemember Kavanaugh noted that at the conclusion of the presentation, the students would present several proposals for the Committee's consideration.

Mr. Anderson expressed appreciation to the Committee for providing the students an opportunity to present their research and the proposals they will make at the "Project Citizen" program next week. **(See Attachment 1)** He invited each student to come forward to address the Committee.

Jamie Lavender reported that plastic bags endanger the environment due to runaway litter affecting landscapes, cityscapes, lakes and oceans. She said the fact that plastic bags take 300 to 500 years to decompose is a major concern, which leads to a detrimental effect on wildlife on land and sea, and the clutter of litter wherever the wind and ocean currents carry them. Ms. Lavender cited examples of bans on plastic bags as follows: A.) The nation of China, with 1.3 billion people, has banned plastic bags; B.) The city of San Francisco has also banned plastic bags; and C.) The city of Washington, D.C. has placed a five-cent surcharge on plastic bags used by customers to carry out purchased retail items.

Travis Haggard indicated that plastic bags harm the environment and are an escalating problem. He commented that although plastic bags are convenient and cost effective, they are not biodegradable and do not completely dissolve; instead, they dissolve into microscopic particles called plastic dust, which is extremely harmful to the soil. He further reported that an estimated 200,000 wildlife animals are being killed annually by plastic bags and added that an estimated 354,000 plastic bags were collected off of the nation's beaches in the Ocean Conservancy international cleanup in 2007.

Mr. Haggard also remarked that many people do not know that plastic bags are a problem. He stated that China and San Francisco have realized this fact and have completely banned plastic bags. Mr. Haggard further reported that Washington, D.C. and Ireland have put a tax on each bag and as a result, have seen a great decrease in their usage. He added that his class believes in ultimately banning plastic bags in Arizona and the United States of America as a whole, and urged the City of Mesa to initiate this action.

Simon Hernandez commented that if everyone remains status quo with regard to this issue, the growing population will magnify the plastic bag problems as time goes on. He said there would be even more litter and even more wildlife tragedies. Mr. Hernandez stated that if Mesa takes aggressive steps, its sister cities may jump on board and thereby double or triple its effectiveness in reducing the harmful environmental impact of plastic bag litter. He added that in the long haul, Arizona could join China, San Francisco, Ireland and Washington, D.C. as leaders in eliminating the disastrous impact plastic bags have on our environment.

Mr. Hernandez outlined the class proposals (from the most profound to least profound) as follows:

1. A City ordinance banning the use of plastic bags by retailers in the City of Mesa.
2. A City surcharge of five cents on plastic bags used by customers to carry out purchased retail items. (Similar to Washington, D.C.)

Ian Minnick continued with the presentation and reported that the "Project Citizen" group has devised two alternative solutions to this pressing dilemma: 1.) Convince retailers to stop providing plastic bags at their stores; and 2.) Pass an ordinance through the City Council in order to put a tax on plastic bags or ultimately ban them. He noted, however, that both of the solutions have flaws and commented that if the stores do not "catch on" to being green and banning plastic bags, it will run the competition that have gone green "into the ground." Mr. Minnick said that if the City Council does not adopt the ordinance, the issue will be "put back at square one." He added that his fellow students have chosen to go through the City Council to pass an ordinance to ultimately ban plastic bags.

Mr. Hernandez displayed a 100% biodegradable plastic bag that his father acquired on a trip to Hawaii. He explained that the bag, which is made of all natural bioplastic polymers, will not harm the environment and decomposes in 30 to 40 days.

Ariane Salem stated that the Mesa City Council should encourage retailers to make a switch to biodegradable bags like they have in Hawaii. She explained that these bags break down much more quickly than regular plastic bags and have been embraced by the retailers in the Waikiki area. Ms. Salem stated that an advantage of this is the new biodegradable plastic bags are the same size and convenience as the current plastic bags. She noted that if the retailers allow their current inventory of plastic bags to run out while ordering the biodegradable plastic bags for future inventory, the plastic bag problem would effectively end within a year.

Jeanette Dilley commented that although it seems that there are many disadvantages, there are just as many advantages to the solution. She stated that if an ordinance is passed, the surrounding cities could follow our example and more wildlife could be saved. Ms. Dilley also remarked that with fewer plastic bags and more biodegradable bags, the landfills will incrementally lessen. She added that banning plastic bags or even taxing them would automatically cut the use of plastic bags and concluded that we can and should take action.

Lucia Vidal addressed the Committee and stated that the students realize that much more research and retail "buy-in" are needed. She stated that perhaps they are only scratching the surface to their ultimate goal, but said they need to begin. Ms. Vidal suggested that perhaps the City of Mesa can take the lead in researching the students' cause by creating a "Council of Retailers," which might embrace this cause and others for the betterment of the business community at large. She thanked the Committee for their time and attention on behalf of her fellow students at Rhodes Junior High School.

Jovin James advised that his class proposal may involve incremental steps, gradually progressing to a well thought out goal of a Citywide ban or a tax on plastic bags. He explained that his class hopes to either reduce or altogether stop the use of plastic bags, resulting in a safer and cleaner environment. Mr. James further commented that the barriers that prevent his class from fulfilling such an act would include the public, retailers and the City Council. He also noted that places like China and San Francisco have completely banned plastic bags. Mr. James indicated that Washington, D.C. has put a five-cent tax on every plastic bag that people use and said that Ireland has placed a fifteen-cent tax on plastic bags, thereby reducing the consumption rate by 90%. He added that hopefully Mesa would also ban plastic bags.

The students responded to questions posed by the Committeemembers regarding the source of their statistical information and the impacts of biodegradable bags.

Committeemember Richins stated that he was intrigued by the students' proposals and especially liked their community outreach campaign. He suggested that perhaps the students could research an alternative option of encouraging retailers to invest in cloth bags, charging customers a deposit on the bags, and incentivizing the customers to reuse the bags on future visits to the store.

Committeemember Kavanaugh clarified that it was his understanding that the students prefer that the City take steps to ban plastic bags in Mesa. He stated that in lieu of such action, the students would like staff to explore other options, such as the adoption of an ordinance that

would require the use of the biodegradable bags, or imposing a surcharge on the use of plastic bags. Committeemember Kavanaugh added that the students further requested that the City upgrade its community relations program to educate Mesa residents relative to the problems associated with plastic bags and encourage the use of reusable cloth bags.

Committeemember Kavanaugh further suggested that the students conduct research to determine whether the surcharge that Washington, D.C. and Ireland has placed on plastic bags is being used for environmental/recycling purposes. He also thanked the class for their efforts and hard work and stated that they have identified a serious environmental issue.

In response to a series of questions from Committeemember Richins, Solid Waste Management Department Director Willie Black clarified that the City of Mesa does not accept plastic bags in the blue barrels and stated that the bags clog the machinery and interfere with the recycling process.

Discussion ensued relative to the Solid Waste Department's efforts to educate the public regarding recycling; that the City and Mesa Public Schools are sponsoring an upcoming plastic bag recycling challenge for elementary school students; that last year, the City and Wal-Mart conducted a similar recycling challenge, which resulted in funds being distributed to the participating schools; and that biodegradable bags, like plastic bags, would clog the machinery and it would be more appropriate to dispose of such items in the black barrels.

Committeemember Richins expressed appreciation to the students for the interesting presentation. He also encouraged the students to seek out "neutral" sources (i.e., universities or non-profit organizations) to corroborate the statistical information that they cite during their presentation.

Committeemember Kavanaugh asked that staff review the information and alternatives presented by the students in order to determine which options they might want to submit to the Committee for further review and discussion. He stated that he was particularly interested in the costs associated with the use of biodegradable bags and also whether the surcharge placed on the plastic bags is used for environmental purposes. Committeemember Kavanaugh added that he would hope that the City could use the students' presentation to further buttress Mesa's public education efforts regarding recycling and the use of plastic bags.

Chairwoman Higgins stated that she lived in England in the late 1980's and early 1990's when plastic bags were first introduced. She explained that retailers charged customers five pence per bag, which prompted individuals to reuse the bags in order to save money. Chairwoman Higgins added that as the bags became less expensive to manufacture, they were provided free of charge to the customers.

Mr. Anderson briefly reviewed the students' presentations at the upcoming "Project Citizen" District Competition, which will be held at the East Valley Academy. He explained that the students will present their findings/proposals to a panel of administrators, teachers and lawyers. Mr. Anderson asked that he be apprised of any efforts undertaken by the City with regard to the students' research project.

Chairwoman Higgins expressed appreciation to Mr. Anderson and the students for an interesting and informative presentation.

3. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Community & Neighborhood Services Committee meeting adjourned at 4:59 p.m.

I hereby certify that the foregoing minutes are a true and correct copy of the minutes of the Community & Neighborhood Services Committee meeting of the City of Mesa, Arizona, held on the 23rd day of February, 2010. I further certify that the meeting was duly called and held and that a quorum was present.

LINDA CROCKER, CITY CLERK

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(attachment – 1)