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## Area grocers urge the use of canvas bags

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Rebecca Bergus, store manager of the Coralville New Pioneer Co-op, said when some people come through check-out lines there, they have a mild guilt trip about the way their groceries are bagged.

"They think, 'Ah, plastic bags are bad, so I think I should choose paper,'" she said.

But the reality is, paper bags aren't much better, Bergus said.

The Iowa City-based National Co-op Grocers Association, which represents 109 natural food co-ops across the country, is urging its members to do more in the fight against paper and plastic.

"I would say it's a hot topic right now," said Robynn Shrader, the group's chief executive officer.

Shrader said it takes 12 million barrels of oil to produce one year's worth of plastic bags, and 12 million trees to make that many paper bags.

"I think co-ops have led the charge more on getting out information and making consumers aware," she said.

Shrader said if consumers have to choose, they should pick the bag they most likely will reuse after they leave the store.

Bergus said at the Co-op, employees in check-out lines gently try to nudge the idea of reusable bags into shopper's heads.

"We tried scripting it," she said. "Oh, did you bring your bags today? Oh! That's wonderful."

Both the Coralville and Iowa City locations are members of the NCGA, and both sell a variety of canvas bags starting at \$5, Bergus said.

But, she said, there are more barriers to using canvas bags and other reusable items than availability.

"They can be expensive," she said. "And one of the troubles I find is people don't perceive things as being reusable, even if they are."

For example, she said the co-op used to have more durable plastic bags as an option, but people only would bring them back to the store to recycle them. The same goes for the multi-bottle wine holders they use, Bergus said.

"But I'm seeing (canvas bags) more and more, and that's really encouraging," she said. "There's definitely more of an awareness."

Joan Burns, who started Cart by Cart LLC, said her canvas bag company has grown leaps and bounds since she started it last year.

She now supplies 51 grocery stores in Iowa and five just in the Iowa City Area.

"And they continue to re-order with me," she said.

Burns said she could name a number of reasons people don't use canvas bags -- they forget, they don't want to buy them or they are afraid they'll get dirty. But, she said, employing reusable bags is the right thing to do for the environment.

As a few tips, Burns said people should keep canvas bags in their cars or on doorknobs, so they don't forget to use them. Canvas bags also can be machine-washed and line-dried, she said. Customers are a big part of the equation, she said.

"The other part of that does need to come from stores," Burns said. "It needs to be incentivized."

In the future, stores possibly could charge for use of paper or plastic bags, or give discounts to people who bring their own bags.

Bergus said those ideas have circulated around, but grocers still have to think about clean store practices, and sometimes that means using plastic.

"We're not the environment police," she said.

Dale Jones, grocery manager at Fareway on Mormon Trek -- one of the stores that sells Burns' bags -- said he has heard of other cities in the country, like San Francisco, that have banned plastic bags.

"But that's a long ways from here," he said.

Jones said the decision to carry Burns' product was simple. People were asking for them.

"There are just a lot of people who are wanting to use those bags," he said. "You give the customers what they are asking for."

So, Jones said the store will store continue to use paper and plastic as long as customers ask for those, too.

"You just have to adjust to what's happening," he said.

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