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'Workaholic' turns efforts to reducing plastic bag use

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An informal survey of plastic-bag usage at local supermarkets and department stores helped convince Joan Barenfanger it was time to act.

"I was shocked. They all were in a range of 10,000 to 15,000 a week," said Barenfanger, who retired two years ago more than 30 years with the pathology department at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield.

She was the chairwoman of pathology and laboratory medicine from 2003 until her retirement.

A self-described workaholic before retirement, Barenfanger has used some of that additional flexibility to launch The Better Bag project through the Green Business Network of Springfield.

The network, formed last summer, has about 70 participants, according to Wynne Coplea, recycling coordinator for the City of Springfield.

Early on, The Better Bag Project involved giveaways at the downtown farmers market. Now, a group of University of Illinois Springfield students and students from the Springfield public schools' Capital College Preparatory Academy have joined in.

The Schnucks supermarket chain added a "Did You Remember Your Reusable Bags?" banner at a Montvale Plaza store. Bunn-O-Matic Corp. and the County Market chain also have gotten involved.

Home-based cause

Barenfanger still has about 100 of her first order of 200 reusable red shopping bags.

She also has a ready database of government and industry research, handouts and websites on just how many billions of plastic bags are out there, waiting to be shipped, shopped, packed and tossed.

There's also the, everywhere-you-look runaway bags that swirl in shopping center parking lots, down empty streets or are stranded in trees.

Among highlights of Barenfanger's educational material:

- * Americans go through about 14 billion plastic bags annually; it takes about 12 million barrels of oil annually to produce the bags.
- * Four of five bags handed out at supermarkets are plastic.
- * Only 1 percent of plastic bags are recycled.
- * Plastic bags remains in landfills for hundreds of years.

"I've always been interested in the environment, and now I have the time," said Barenfanger.

Barenfanger adds that she has been as guilty as anyone when it comes to the convenience of plastic bags, adding that she still slips up from time-to-time by forgetting to bring the reusable version.

"Every now and then, you'll see me sneaking out of supermarkets with plastic bags," said Barenfanger. "We have to change the societal norms. We simply have to remake our cultural habits."

Class projects and downtown Springfield

A group of UIS students has taken up The Better Bag effort as a class project. The university students and sixth-graders at the Capital College Preparatory Academy also have combined on design and poster projects.

"Some of our members have actually gone around campus collecting plastic bags," said Haesun Chang, a sophomore in biology at UIS.

The students planned a bake sale at the Walmart on South Sixth Street this weekend to raise money for reusable shopping bags.

Chang said the students were given a choice of projects.

"We read the descriptions ,and The Better Bag project seemed to fit," said Chang, who added that the group is looking at ways to reduce bag-clutter downtown.

Steve Myers, who is working with the Green Business Network on behalf of Downtown Springfield Inc., said the plastic-bag initiative is among several proposals for reducing downtown litter.

"We'd like to put communal dumpsters on each block where cardboard could be recycled," said Myers.

Bag bans?

Barenfanger said retailers have been receptive to her effort, as plastic bags are a cost to the bottom line.

And contrary even to her initial notions, paper bags are not an environmentally friendly alternative, she said, as paper bag production requires even more energy.

Plastic-bag bans have been approved in some areas of the country, including most recently in Los Angeles County. In 2008, China prohibited supermarkets from giving away free plastic bags. Seattle is considering a 20-cent tax per plastic bag.

Barenfanger said she doesn't foresee such dramatic measures in Springfield, adding that The Better Bag project is more about changing habits. As an alternative to reusable shopping bags, she said the group encourages consumers to use plastic-bag recycling bins that are common in supermarkets.

The bags can be recycled for use in furniture manufacturing, she said.

Barenfanger said she is realistic about the switch from plastic to reusable shopping bags, adding that The Better Bag project is not a "tree-hugger" campaign.

"We have to know that just consuming stuff like this, on a gut level, is not good for the environment," said Barenfanger.

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Want more information?

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