Markets and S.F. agree on reducing bag use
Goal is 10 million fewer plastic sacks for grocery shoppers
- Charlie Goodyear, Chronicle Staff Writer
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San Francisco officials have struck an ambitious deal with large supermarket chains to reduce by 10 million the number of plastic grocery bags given to shoppers by the end of next year.

The agreement comes after political support for a proposed 17-cent tax on grocery bags in San Francisco -- which would have been a first for any American city -- failed to materialize earlier this year.

The deal, to be honored by Albertson's, Andronico's, Bell Markets, CalMart, Cala Foods, Foods Co., Mollie Stone's and Safeway stores at 54 locations, will permit the city's Department of the Environment to count bags handed out to shoppers -- usually a closely held business secret for supermarkets. The stores also have agreed to examine their in-store recycling efforts and promotion of reusable bags to help reach the city's reduction goal.

"We do, in my perspective, have a problem," said Mayor Gavin Newsom at a City Hall press conference with supermarket executives. "There is an environmental impact of bags. This will be the first city in America to establish these types of goals."

The exact number of grocery bags dispensed in the city each year is unknown, but estimates range from 50 million to 150 million. A majority are plastic, and they are blamed for clogging landfills, jamming recycling machines and killing marine life.

"I think 10 million bags is significant," said Jared Blumenfeld, director of the city's Department of the Environment. "It amounts to 95 tons that doesn't end up in landfills."

The agreement also calls for the city to attempt to establish curbside pickup and recycling of plastic bags by the end of 2006. City officials say the city's trash collection contractor, Norcal Waste Systems, isn't equipped to recycle the bags.

Members of the mayor's staff credit the Department of the Environment -- which pushed to create a 17-cent bag tax -- with getting supermarket chains to agree to the deal. The agreement will preclude the city from pursuing such a tax until the deal expires next year. The companies also will pay $100,000 toward a campaign to make San Franciscans aware of the conservation and recycling program.

Karl Schroeder, president of Safeway's Northern California Division, said company employees would be retrained to use fewer bags when packing groceries. He said Safeway stores in the city also would sell reusable canvas bags to customers -- at cost.

Newsom and industry executives hailed the agreement, but Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi voiced concern; he had led the effort to apply a bag tax in San Francisco that would be paid by grocery stores, not shoppers.

Mirkarimi was invited to attend the press conference in the mayor's office and actually kept Newsom -- habitually late to events -- waiting briefly with reporters. When asked for his comments, the supervisor didn't hesitate to critique the agreement.

"I have faith that this is a good half-step, but I am cautious," Mirkarimi said. The supervisor noted that the
grocery and plastics industries had spent thousand of dollars campaigning against the idea of a bag tax even before any legislation relating to it had been introduced.

Newsom stepped back to the microphone to rebut Mirkarimi's characterization. "I think it's more than a half-step," he said, adding: "I'm a pragmatist."

The mayor's deal doesn't cover smaller grocery stores or drugstores such as Walgreen's, which use a large number of plastic bags. City officials hope that if the plan, which Newsom described as a pilot program, catches on, other retailers will feel pressure to participate.

Earlier this year, a proposal to charge a 17-cent bag tax, which probably would have been passed on to consumers, appeared to have little political support on the Board of Supervisors. But an aide to the mayor said a tax of a few cents per bag is still possible if the new plan falls short next year.

"The prospect of that debate resurfacing exists," Newsom conceded.

Deal in the bag

Terms of an agreement with large supermarkets to reduce the number of plastic shopping bags used in San Francisco:

Reduction: The city has set a goal of reducing by 10 million the number of checkout bags dispensed by supermarkets by Dec. 31, 2006.

Count: The city's Department of the Environment will be allowed to count the bags given to shoppers -- collecting information the stores previously have refused to disclose.

Recycling: Supermarkets will examine their in-store bag recycling programs.

Collection: San Francisco will take steps to establish curbside pickup and recycling of plastic bags.

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