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Environmental column

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PAPER OR PLASTIC?

Have you ever wondered which type of bag to choose at the grocery store? It's actually a trick question! The correct answer to the paper or plastic quandary is NEITHER ONE! B.Y.O.B.—Bring Your Own Bag! Bring your own shopping bag to the store, whether it be reusing the plastic or paper bags from previous shopping trips, or using a cloth bag. Don't be fooled into thinking you only have two options available—another option besides just paper or plastic!

However, even the best recycler and greenest waste reducer can sometimes forget to bring their own bags to the store. So which is better, paper or plastic? Paper bags can be recycled in DWR recycling carts, however the production of paper bags requires more energy to produce and creates more water and airborne pollutants than plastic bags. If they are not recycled properly, plastic bags will sit in the landfill a long time before they degrade, while paper breaks down easily. Plastic bags can also be a hazard to wildlife if left as litter. Plastic is made from a valuable non-renewable resource (petroleum) while paper is produced from a (somewhat) renewable resource (trees).



Bringing your own bags when you shop is the best way to reduce waste. Reusing paper and plastic grocery bags is also a very environmental idea.

Please do NOT place plastic bags inside the recycling carts—even if the plastic bag contains other recyclables. You can recycle your plastic grocery bags at the store they came from. State Assembly Bill 2449, which will take effect in July of this year, requires all major grocery stores to take back plastic bags for free recycling. Many stores are jumping on this initiative early, and are already offering free recycling of plastic bags and are selling reusable bags at a very reasonable price.

It's very important to keep in mind the "big picture". Many things may seem very environmentally friendly in the short-term, but in the long run perhaps not!

Take for example the plastic grocery bag. Reusing plastic grocery bags is a very important thing to do for the environment! Plastic grocery bags can be reused for many things—packing a lunch, carrying things and lining garbage cans inside your home. If plastic grocery bags are no longer available, people who are currently reusing plastic grocery bags to line their trash cans (myself included!) would buy plastic trash can liners instead. These liners are made of thicker plastic film than grocery bags and are usually packaged in boxes that are wrapped in plastic—more overall waste than a single plastic grocery bag. Add to that the environmental cost of shipping trash bag liners (burning fossil fuels), reusing the plastic grocery bags you already have lying around the house is a better choice! Buying plastic trash can liners instead of reusing a plastic grocery bag creates *more* waste and is not as good for the environment.

There is a Hierarchy of the Four R's: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rebuy. **REDUCING** your waste is the best because it stops waste before it starts. If you always bring your own bag when you go to the store, you are stopping waste at the source by not bringing home any more bags. If you **REUSE** your paper or plastic bags (bring them back to the store again to reuse, or use them for something else) that's also great! **RECYCLING** is third in line, because it requires energy, water and other resources to extract and purify raw material from a product. Then, of course, it's important to "close the loop" by **REBUYING**—purchasing products that are made from recycled products.

If you reuse your grocery bags, it doesn't really matter if you get paper or plastic, because you are prolonging the life of the product. The reason the paper or plastic choice is such a dilemma in the first place is that it is generally assumed that the bags are used only once and then disposed. The emphasis on the decision is focused on the disposal of the bag. However, if reuse of the product and then recycling were to be taken into account, the pictures changes slightly. Either paper or plastic is OK, just as long as you reuse the bags first, then recycle them.

FREE HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTE DROP-OFF EVENT

Don't miss this month's free household hazardous waste drop-off events today and tomorrow, June 8 & 9 from 9:00am to 2:00pm at the Yolo County Central Landfill! Bring in your paints, pesticides, fluorescent light bulbs, household cleaners, expired medicines and more for FREE and safe disposal. Mark your calendar for the household hazardous waste drop-off dates next month, July 13 and 14 from 9:00am to 2:00pm.

For more information, visit www.davisrecycling.org or email me at PWweb@cityofdavis.org.

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