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S.F. OKs toughest recycling law in U.S.

By John Cote, Staff Writer

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Throwing orange peels, coffee grounds and grease-stained pizza boxes in the trash will be against the law in San Francisco, and could even lead to a fine.

The Board of Supervisors voted 9-2 Tuesday to approve Mayor Gavin Newsom's proposal for the most comprehensive mandatory composting and recycling law in the country. It's an aggressive push to cut greenhouse gas emissions and have the city sending nothing to landfills or incinerators by 2020.

"San Francisco has the best recycling and composting programs in the nation," Newsom said, praising the board's vote on a plan that some residents had decried as heavy-handed and impractical. "We can build on our success."

The ordinance is expected to take effect this fall.

The legislation calls for every residence and business in the city to have three separate color-coded bins for waste: blue for recycling, green for compost and black for trash.

Failing to properly sort your refuse could result in a fine after several warnings, but Newsom and other officials say fines will only be levied in the most egregious cases.

Fines for almost all residential customers and many small businesses - anyone who generates less than a cubic yard of refuse a week - are initially capped at \$100.

Businesses that don't have proper bins face escalating fines up to \$500.

There is a moratorium on fines until at least July 2011 for tenants and owners of multifamily buildings or multitenant commercial properties to get people used to composting. Buildings where recycling carts won't fit can get a waiver.

"In any scenario there will be repeated notices and phone calls before we even start talking about fines," said Jared Blumenfeld, head of the city's Department of the Environment. "We don't want to fine people."

The proposal, hailed as an effective way to cut about two-thirds of the 618,000 tons of waste the city sent to landfill in 2007, drew resistance from some apartment building owners when details emerged about a year ago. And some residents were upset over the possibility of inspectors checking their garbage.

The ordinance calls for garbage collectors to leave tags on containers when they spot incorrectly sorted material, but those collectors are only going to view what's on top of the container and have no intention of going through them, said Robert Reed, a spokesman for San Francisco collectors Sunset Scavenger Co. and Golden Gate Disposal & Recycling Co., subsidiaries of Recology, formerly Norcal Waste Systems.

"Our role is to pick up the garbage and to make recycling as easy and convenient as possible for our customers," Reed said. "Our collection drivers will not become enforcers."

City officials would levy any fines, and the legislation doesn't provide funding for new trash inspectors.

"It doesn't create trash police," Blumenfeld said.

Support mixed

Newsom's proposal created odd political bedfellows at the Board of Supervisors.

It was co-sponsored by frequent Newsom critics, Supervisors Chris Daly and Ross Mirkarimi, while two of the mayor's most reliable allies, Supervisors Carmen Chu and

Sean Elsbernd, were the only opponents. "This is a little too much big brother, even for me," Elsbernd said. "We've got a huge problem in my district and a lot of other parts of the city with people who go in and out of garbage cans at night scavenging. Who's going to be responsible for that? Are we creating a whole brand-new problem?"

Elsbernd also questioned assurances that fines would not be aggressively pursued against residents, saying similar promises were broken on legislation against leaving trash cans visible.

The San Francisco Apartment Association, a trade group for rental property owners, took a neutral stance on the plan after language was dropped that would have held landlords responsible for tenants' sorting.

Cities from Pittsburgh to San Diego have mandatory recycling. None, however, requires all food waste to be composted. Seattle passed a law in 2003 requiring people to have a compost bin but, unlike San Francisco, it did not mandate that all food waste go in there.

Reducing trash

Newsom floated the mandatory recycling idea in April 2008 as he faced the city's self-imposed goals of having a 75 percent recycling rate in 2010, with zero waste by 2020. The rationale behind the move is clear. Material like food scraps and plant clippings that go into landfills take up costly space and decompose to form methane, a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

A June 2008 report by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a group focused on environmentally sound community development, said a zero waste approach is one of the fastest, cheapest and most effective ways to protect the climate. Cutting waste sent to landfills and incinerators would be like closing 21 percent of U.S. coal-fired power plants, the report said.

About 36 percent of what San Francisco sends to landfill is compostable, and another 31 percent is recyclable, a comprehensive study found.

By the city's count, it currently diverts 72 percent of its waste, best in the nation. If recyclables and compostables going into landfills were diverted, the city's recycling rate would jump to 90 percent, Blumenfeld said.

Only 22 percent of the city's 10,000 large apartment buildings have composting bins, but the number has tripled in the last year, Reed said.

"Once people start to compost," he said, "they find it easy to do."

One hang-up, of course, is the perceived yuck factor.

"It's a false phobia that things are going to smell," Reed said. "It's the same garbage you already had, it's just handling it differently, in a more environmentally responsible way."

Composting tips

- You don't need a specially designed composting pail in your kitchen; a paper milk carton or a paper grocery bag work just fine.
- With a paper grocery bag, put some newspaper in the bottom to absorb moisture.
- Start with easy things - orange peels, coffee grounds, eggshells - to get the hang of it.
- If you're using a paper bag, roll down the top to close it. Knot the end of compostable bags.
- The composting bin has an attached lid. Keep it closed.

Source: Golden Gate Disposal & Recycling Co.