



where plastic bags belong.

# Bag Central Station... Two Years Strong and Growing

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*By Debbie Roth*

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**A**s City Councils throughout Arizona slowly but surely address the issue of whether to place a tax on plastic bags or ban them entirely, the Grocery Industry proposes another solution... education. While plastic bags are recyclable they can not be collected through traditional collection methods. Plastic bags must be separated from other recycled materials, a problem that most Arizona residents are unaware of as they continue to put their used plastic bags in the recycling container at the curb. This practice causes damage to processing equipment, problems in processing quality and reductions in the market value of recycled materials.

In November of 2007, the Arizona Food Marketing Alliance launched a campaign to address the issue of recycling plastic bags. This voluntary action step resulted in a five step plan that has been executed in most instances voluntarily throughout the state.

1. Retail establishments that provide plastic carry-put bags for their customers will place a recycling container for the bags in a prominent location inside their store, preferably near the entrance.

2. Any carry-out plastic bags utilized will have a "reduce, reuse, recycle" message on it.

3. An education and marketing partnership was formed between cities and participating retailers to jointly market the plastic bag recycling program.

4. Retailers are encouraged to offer for purchase at retail establishment's reusable shopping bags.

5. Cities will measure the volume of film plastic bags at the City's transfer stations, and retailers will measure the volume collected in the recycling containers.

City staff continues to report back to City Councils with the results of the voluntary recycling plastic bag efforts. Should the voluntary program prove to be ineffective, a mandatory program would be evaluated as a next step. Thankfully, the community has rallied around the Bag Central Station solution and as more and more cities evaluate their recycling concerns, education and communication of the message "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" resonates.

## Success Stories



### The City of Avondale

Thanks to a successful partnership that the City of Avondale has with Bashas', Valley Wide Recycling Partnership and Phoenix International Raceway (PIR), NASCAR fans visiting Avondale for race weekends have been encouraged to recycle. As a result, the PIR track has diverted a significant amount of recyclable materials from the landfill.

In November 2009, the City of Avondale provided 53 blue recycle bins to PIR to make it easy for race fans to recycle. The blue bins – which collected plastics, cans, glass, paper and cardboard – were placed in visible locations throughout the track and at the exit of the Bashas' on-site supermarket. Volunteers unloaded the blue bins 120 times in one weekend, collecting more than 3,000 lbs. of recyclable materials, an amount equivalent to 92,960 empty 12 oz. beer cans!

"Last year was a record-breaking year for recycle collections," said Les Miller, Avondale's Recycling Coordinator. "This proves to us that people will recycle more often if they are presented with the option to do so."

This will be the sixth race weekend where recycling is offered to race fans in Avondale. The collaborative team effort – from the City of Avondale, Valley Wide Recycling Partnership, PIR and Bashas' – earned the "Business Recycling Project of the Year" award last year from the Arizona Recycling Coalition.

"As a local, family-owned grocer, we believe that the choices businesses make impact the quality of life in the communities in which they operate," said Telleann Dong, manager of special projects for Bashas'. "We have the most impact when we collaborate with vendors, suppliers, customers, municipalities, public utilities and our employees on sustainability programs. That's why we're so proud to be part of this results-driven endeavor."



*Business Recycling Project of the Year: Recycling at Nascar*

### The City of Tempe

Tempe has incorporated Bag Central Station into their recycling and educational outreach programs/partnerships. One initiative is their Education Recycling Information Center (ERIC). The ERIC unit is a mobile trailer with museum quality exhibits that travels to schools, special events, conventions, and neighborhoods promoting sustainable practices such as Bag Central Station. Since July 2009, ERIC has traveled 226.4 miles and 6,150 visitors have boarded the unit.



In November of 2009, the City of Tempe staged an event called the Green Day Recycling Challenge in honor of America Recycles Day. This was a community multi-purpose recycling day that collected 57.5 pounds of plastic bags from 196 Tempe residents. A free reusable bag was given to residents who participated in the recycling challenge. The plastic bags were delivered to Bashas' for recycling. The event was advertised in newspapers and was a featured story in the ASU State Press. These events have been very successful and provide Tempe with an opportunity to promote environmental awareness with such programs as Bag Central Station. The next multi-purpose recycling day challenge event was held April 10, 2010, in honor of Earth Month.

### City of Phoenix



*AFMA's Debbie Roth mans the Bag Central Station exhibit on Earth Day*

In partnership with Keep Phoenix Beautiful, the City of Phoenix hosted an Earth Day event on April 22, 2010 during the noon hour at Cesar Chavez Plaza in downtown Phoenix. The event brought residents and members of the business community together to learn from a variety of exhibitors what they can do to reduce waste. With a core message on the benefits of recycling and information on how an organization can recycle, Earth Day Phoenix 2010 also represented sustainability topics such as water waste reduction and efficient energy. AFMA along with other

businesses, city, state and county departments promoted resources available to the community to aid them in recycling efforts. As an exhibitor, AFMA promoted Bag Central Station with talking points representative of its members' efforts and handed out reusable bags provided by its members.

Similar scenarios are occurring throughout the State of Arizona as the sustainability efforts of the business community through communication and education continue to impact the local recycling efforts occurring in cities and towns. The Bag Central Station stake holders who include: Albertsons, Bashas', Circle K, Fry's, Pro's Ranch Markets, Safeway, Sprouts Farmers Market, Sunflower Farmers Market, Wal-Mart and the IGA group continue to impact the communities where their stores are located.

## Stake Holders Weigh In

### Sprouts Farmers Market

As one of the largest and fastest growing companies in the Natural Foods industry, Sprouts takes its environmental responsibility very serious. Over the past few years, they've taken a three pronged approach which includes plastic bag recycling, promoting usage of reusable shopping bags, and environmentally sound design and building practices.

While Sprouts offers customers the choice of paper or plastic bags at checkout, they also heavily promote recycling of plastic bags through their partnership with AFMA and the Bag Central Station program. Over the past 2 years, Sprouts has collected and recycled over 55,000 pounds of plastic bags, representing 16% of their total plastic bag usage. Sprouts also offers a five cent credit to those customers who reuse their plastic bags, resulting in the reuse of over 6.5 million bags over the past 2 years.

In addition to their recycling efforts, Sprouts also aggressively promotes the use of reusable shopping bags in every store. In fact, over the past 2 years Sprouts has sold over 650,000 reusable bags and given away an additional 200,000 bags at grand openings and special events. To expedite the use of these bags in new stores, every customer order is bagged in Sprouts reusable bags on grand opening day. Special promotions are also held, such as their "Gift Giving is in the Bag" promotion, where customers are encouraged to eliminate wrapping paper waste by giving their holiday gifts in Sprouts red and green reusable bags.

### Albertsons

At Albertsons LLC, responsibly managing the Earth's resources means a great deal. They take environmental issues seriously, especially recycling plastics and plastic bags. The company has been involved in recycling since 1994. Last year alone, the Albertsons stores (companywide) recycled over 1.2 Million pounds of plastic that would have otherwise ended up in landfills. In fact, in the 9 years since offering plastic recycling points in their stores and tracking how much has been recycled, Albertsons stores and distribution centers have recycled over 15 million pounds of plastic wrap and bags.

Currently, Albertsons stores carry plastic and paper bags to serve their customers' needs, as well as reusable grocery bags customers can purchase to help reduce the impact that plastic bags have on the environment. As a proactive partner, Albertsons LLC is urging and helping customers to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle through their in-store sign program:

- **REDUCE:** New signage will help educate the customer about reducing the use of plastic bags by making sure bags are packed full and not double bagged, or better yet, suggesting the customer buy a reusable bag;
- **REUSE:** Newly designed cloth shopping bags highlighted by new signage will offer the customer a choice;
- **RECYCLE:** Albertsons provides a recycle bin for plastic bags.

### Fry's Food Stores

Kroger as a national company had a goal of saving 1 billion plastic bags in 2009. Fry's, which is the Arizona division of Kroger, recycled over 700,000 pounds of plastic through its recycling programs at their stores, which is the equivalent of 70 million bags. They sold over 400,000 re-useable bags to their consumers who in-turn reused almost 3 million bags when shopping in Fry's.

Courtesy clerks at Fry's are trained to put five items in a plastic bag which calculates out to be a reduction of 30 million bags leaving the stores. In total, during 2009 Fry's was able to save almost 100 million plastic bags from being on the street or collecting in homes.

### Safeway

Bag Central Station flourishes in the Northern part of the state as Safeway Store Managers continue to connect with local city councils and the communities they serve. Recycle bins and signage with Bag Central Station's message "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" are prominent in the communities of Flagstaff, Williams and Kingman.

Safeway has increased their commitment to re-useable bags since Bag Central Stations' implementation in 2007. Since that time they have grown this retail category over 300% keeping plastic bags out of the landfill and reducing reliance on paper bags. As one of the first major grocers to offer re-useable bags on a large scale they offer an array of bags that are fashionable, functional and socially responsible.



## Epilogue

Under the umbrella of Bag Central Station, grocery retailers have had the opportunity to expand their own programs while working with Arizona Cities to implement a voluntary education and awareness campaign the likes of which no other state has successfully put in to action. For the Retailers, this has lead to increased sales of reusable bags as well as visibility for programs that had never seen the kind of attention that was now being cast upon them. "We've had a tremendous amount of success in a little over two years," said Tim McCabe, president of AFMA. "Last year, almost a thousand tons of plastic bags were recycled. There are almost 132,000 plastic bags per ton, and I think if you do the math, you'll understand how many plastic bags are being recycled through this process".

Cities and municipalities across the nation have been impacted by legislation with regard to plastic bag use. Some have seen bans, some taxes; with the creation of Bag Central Station, Arizona's Grocery Industry in partnership with city leaders has successfully assisted in the creation and implementation of a voluntary program that has helped clean up neighborhoods and educate consumers. ♦