

Banning plastic bags, town by town: A guide

February 20 2019, by David Funkhouser



The WalMart in Guilford, CT, offers recycling for single-use plastic bags. The town is considering an ordinance banning plastic bags altogether. Credit: Dave Funkhouser

Since plastic carryout bags were introduced in the 1960s, people have used trillions of them, and, for the most part, thrown them away. And whether they're sitting in a landfill, hung up in a tree limb or floating around the ocean, the bags don't biodegrade, and they're not going away anytime soon. They're free to consumers, convenient and cheap for stores to use. But they have joined billions of tons of tossed-away plastic packaging materials and products to cause a variety of environmental problems. And in a growing number of communities, citizens have decided that they've got to go.

[More than 300 municipalities](#)

[across the United States now ban or charge fees for single-use](#)

[plastic bags](#). California, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and American Samoa have banned them, as have [55 countries](#). Thirty-one more have imposed a fee.

It's unclear how effective these laws have been overall. In some places the bans are barely enforced, particularly poor nations with weak or nonexistent waste collection systems. But in many places, [usage has dramatically declined](#), and litter and its associated problems have been reduced.

The Problem With Plastic

The explosion in the use of these bags is a sign of the much larger problem of [plastic](#) waste, and our attitudes toward the earth's resources.

For all the convenience of free bags, we've been [offloading the real costs](#) of these things—including their disposal and the environmental damage they cause—to the larger public, points out Steve Cohen, former executive director of the Earth Institute.

Plastic bags don't have to be single use: They can be reused, and the low-density polyethylene plastic (LDPE) they're made of [can be recycled](#), or burned with other things to produce energy. But in the United States, we recycle an estimated 5 percent of the bags and toss 100 billion away each year. And, they're hard to recycle because they tend to jam sorting equipment at recycling facilities. If they don't wind up in a landfill, the bags litter the landscape, clog storm drains and sewage treatment systems, pollute rivers and oceans, and choke and kill fish, turtles, seabirds and other wildlife.

The bags are not biodegradable (though biodegradable alternatives exist). But they break down into smaller pieces by wear and tear, exposure to ultraviolet light, and getting munched on by sea life. They can release toxic chemicals into the environment, and absorb toxins as well. When bags [break down into micro-particles](#), the bits can be mistaken for food, ingested by sea life and work their way up the food chain. Scientists are still studying the implications of that.

So what is the best alternative? If you examine the [life cycle of bags](#), taking into account production and transportation, paper has a larger carbon footprint than single-use plastic. Producing cotton for bags has an even larger environmental cost. How much of the paper is made from recycled material, or how the cotton is grown, and how many times the bags are reused all matter.

Bottom line? There's no perfectly clean solution. But, taking something that took millions of years to form (fossil fuels) and tossing it away after using it once for a few minutes is wasteful. Filling the oceans with

plastic refuse and threatening one of our main sources of food, oxygen and recreational pleasure? Crazy.

What You Can Do

If you're already doing your part to reduce, reuse and recycle, what more can you do? Start by thinking bigger, but not too big—one community at a time.

"I think grassroots is where we're going to make the changes," said Terri Cain, an activist leading the charge for a plastic bag ban in Guilford, Conn. "We have to change the way we're thinking." Guilford is one of several Connecticut towns considering bans; some others already have. New York City passed a ban a few years ago but was forced to put that on hold while officials in Albany mull whether to adopt a statewide ban. Meanwhile towns on Long Island and in Westchester County have adopted bans or fees, or both.

Cain and others noted that trying to convince state lawmakers to pass a law can be daunting. The politics of competing interests and the influence of the chemical and retail industry lobbyists can pose obstacles. In fact, 10 U.S. states now have forbidden [local communities](#) from banning plastic bags. Bizbee, Ariz., put a ban in place in 2012 but was forced to rescind it after the state's attorney general said the measure violated state law. The Texas Supreme Court ruled last summer that a ban in Laredo, and by implication bans in force in other towns, violated that state's statutes.

Cain and many others are hoping local ordinances will help eventually change a lot of minds and build momentum for broader legislation. Here's some best advice from those working on the issue.

Build a team

"Gather around you some like-minded people," Cain suggested. Send out some emails, hold a meeting, put a team together. Then, Cain said, give people something to do: "If someone volunteers, give them a job." Find out who are the environmental leaders in your town and what they are up to, and try to get them on board. Then, she added, build a website and get onto social media, if that's your thing.

Know your local government

Talk to the local city council or board of selectmen. Who holds the authority to pass local ordinances, and how do those ordinances get passed? What's the best approach? What are nearby communities doing with this issue? Talk to conservation commissioners and public works officials to see what their issues are, and where they stand.

"You have to understand your city or town government," said Liz Milwe of Westport, Conn., the first community in that state to pass a ban on single-use plastic carryout bags a decade ago. Milwe was one of four elected town meeting members who, prompted by a local citizen, worked together to pass the law. "It's really important to eventually get sponsors in government."



Sydney Leu loads a reusable grocery bag at Bishop's Orchards in Guilford, CT. The store is one of many that are beginning to phase out single use plastic carryout bags. Credit: Dave Funkhouser

Do your research

Learn all you can about the issue. Find out from reliable sources how we use and dispose of plastic bags (the numbers alone can make for persuasive arguments). Why are they such a problem, what's the environmental impact? What are the best alternatives? Seek out differing voices and be ready to hear contradictory arguments. And don't exaggerate the numbers: It costs you credibility and may harm your effort in the long run.

Research plastic bag laws passed elsewhere, talk to people in those communities and find out what worked for them, and what kind of regulations garner the most support. Find the larger groups and websites that can be helpful. There's a lot to learn, and this work can make good assignments for some of your committee members.

Talk to local merchants

"We had a bag summit and invited all the managers and owners [of local stores] to come to Patagonia for a meeting," said Westport's Milwe. "It's really important to do that, and to talk to your chamber of commerce."

Eric Goldstein, a senior attorney with the National Resources Defense Council, agreed. "It's vital to explain your approach, hear them out and address their concerns," he said. Goldstein has been active in the effort to pass a bag law in New York. "Retailers are often troubled by a ban on plastic which only requires them to use many more paper bags, [which are] more expensive and take up more storage room," Goldstein noted.

Charging a fee for paper bags, and returning that to the retailers to help cover their costs, can help, advocates said. That also can encourage shoppers to bring their own bags.

Bishop's Orchards, a farm market in Guilford, pays 17 cents for a paper bag versus 4 cents for plastic, said Sarah Bishop DellaVentura, chief operating officer. The store uses more than half a million plastic checkout bags per year but plans to stop by the end of May. It helped that advocates of the ban agreed to give merchants a lead time to phase out the bags, she said. The Guilford proposal also would allow a charge for paper bags that would go back to the merchants.

"You make it feasible [for merchants], and then we have something we've done together as a community," DellaVentura said. She added that Bishop's plans to use promotions to encourage people to buy and use reusable bags.

The Big Y grocery store in Guilford also will phase out plastic checkout bags. The Massachusetts-based chain says it will eliminate the bags from its 70 supermarkets in 2020. More than 70 cities and towns in Massachusetts already have imposed bans. Numerous other companies have made the move, including Cincinnati-based Kroger Co., which will drop the bags by 2025 at its more than 2,700 stores around the country.

But you should prepare for pushback. Larger retailers will likely send you up the chain of command to a headquarters often remote from your town. Be patient, and keep trying, urged Cain.

Educate the public

Start talking to people in your town. Once you have gathered the facts, get them out there through meetings, flyers, social networks—any way you can.

Cain's group in Guilford set up information tables at local fairs, talked to people at the corner of the town green and showed [a video about plastic bags](#) at the local community center. They joined with the high school's

environmental club; the students cleaned and converted old t-shirts into grocery bags and handed them out at community events. Cain said most people they spoke to responded positively to the effort.

The NRDC's Goldstein said it's crucial to puncture the myth that charging a fee for bags is a "regressive approach" to the problem. "No one's required to pay a fee as long as you bring a bag with you," he said. Goldstein likes laws that combine a ban and a fee for paper; some ordinances require paper carryout bags be made all or partly from recycled material.

"The experience around the country and the world suggest that that's an effective approach to curbing the problem of explosive growth in use of single-use plastic bags and not encouraging the use of additional paper bags," he said.

Advocates also suggest granting exemptions from fees for low-income residents. Some local ordinances waive bag fees for people on food subsidy programs such as SNAP and WIC.

Get on the agenda

Ask your local governing board for a spot on the agenda. Cain suggested writing a letter and getting lots of people to sign it, to show public support. Ask them how much time you can have, and what type of presentation they would prefer—a slide show, handouts, preparatory emails. The more public support you can show—including from the local business community—the better. Once you've looked into what other towns have done, you can begin crafting your own ordinance. Use your contacts in the local government to help.

Cain's open approach, her willingness to listen and learn, have helped her build support. Her overriding rule: "Try to take the positive and build on

that, and show good faith."

The real point of banning bags and similar efforts "is not to end consumption, but to reduce thoughtless, unnecessary consumption," said the Earth Institute's Cohen. "...In the drive to create a more sustainable city and economy, we need to identify other examples of casual and thoughtless consumptive behavior and see if there are ways to either reduce the environmental impact of whatever is consumed, or reduce the consumption itself."

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