

Town of New Shoreham Reusable Bag Initiative

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of New Shoreham's Plastic Bag Ordinance?

Globally, single-use plastic bags are used in extremely high volumes, produced from non-renewable resources and are designed to be disposable. The purpose of the plastic bag ordinance is to lessen environmental, community and public health impacts associated with single-use plastic bags and to promote a major shift towards the use of reusable bags. Objectives of the ordinance are to reduce the amount of plastic that enters the marine environment, advance solid waste reduction, cut greenhouse gas emissions, protect wildlife, and increase public awareness around these issues. Plastic bags that end up in the marine environment, through litter or even attempts to dispose or recycle, result in the deaths of birds, turtles, whales and other marine mammals from entanglement or from eating discarded plastic bags mistaken for food.

What is the benefit to me and my community?

The plastic bag ordinance will result in less litter, which is important not just for environmental and quality of life reasons, but also because Block Island receives a significant economic return as a result of its preservation of natural resources and beautiful surroundings. There is also a rising concern about the impacts on public health from contamination of food and water supply from plastic. More and more marine animals are found with plastic bag particles in their digestive systems and microscopic plastic particles have been found in the tissue of fish.

Why can't we use compostable or biodegradable bags instead?

Bags labelled biodegradable are defined and advertised as being capable of breaking down into smaller pieces. However, smaller pieces of plastic never fully degrade and a high percentage of biodegradable plastic bags end up in landfills that lack crucial elements for proper biodegradation (air, moisture, sunlight). Individuals cannot throw a biodegradable bag on a backyard compost pile and expect the bag to degrade because the temperature won't get hot enough and the plastic content will ruin the compost.

Compostable bags of plant-based content are preferable to biodegradable plastic bags, however, there are also some drawbacks with this solution, mainly that compostable and being composted are two different things. These bags can completely biodegrade in a short period of time in a commercial composting operation (ie beneficial to hold food scraps/ line bins that go into an organics diversion program). However, many individuals lack access to such a facility. Compostable bags (such as those made from cornstarch), require an active composting process, and will not decompose in the natural environment or backyard compost pile because of the lack of heat, or in landfills because of the lack of oxygen.

Since research on biodegradable and compostable bags is not consistent, allowing biodegradable or compostable bags, at this time, does not ensure that the objectives of the ordinance to reduce the impacts of disposable bags would be met. If and when bags that meet the goals of this ordinance become increasing available and cost effective and/or access to commercial composting is improved, the ordinance can be amended.

Is recycling of plastic bags a good solution?

Recycling is not the solution. It is much better for the environment for society to produce and use less plastic bags and have less material to recycle. Many mistakenly put plastic bags in recycling bins which jams recycling equipment causing work stoppages and loss of efficiency at waste collection facilities including Rhode Island Resource Recovery (RIRRC). RIRRC asks that plastic bags be recycled through a program called ReStore (bins required at large grocery stores and retailers) where stores must contract privately with a recycler. It should be noted that there are no retailers on Block Island required to use ReStore bins and that compostable and biodegradable bags are not accepted in the ReStore bins. Sometimes there is no market for recycled plastic bags in the United States requiring us to raise the question of environmental justice when used plastic bags (and other plastics) are baled and shipped to poorer nations where they may be burned or illegally dumped impacting individuals and other communities which were not responsible for producing the waste.

Why aren't paper bags targeted? Aren't there environmental impacts from paper bags?

The objective of the ordinance is to promote the use of reusable bags by reducing our dependence on single-use bags. It is a simple fact that single-use plastic bags are a chronic litter and pollution problem while paper bags, though not ideal, have a far higher recycling rate, are made of organic content and will biodegrade. Paper bags also do not have similar concerns regarding impacts to wildlife and the food system.

Why not educate the public instead of instituting a ban?

Most citizens understand the negative impacts of plastics, specifically single-use plastic bags, on our environment. However, very few people have changed their behavior and elect to use reusable bags when shopping. Education and awareness campaigns will be valuable post adoption of the ordinance and are encouraged by the Planning Board. Efforts could include distribution of a FAQs handout, information posted to Town website, announcements through the newspaper, and posts on social media. The Town should also seek assistance from partners to get the word out such as the Chamber of Commerce, Interstate Navigation, Block Island Airlines, the tourism industry, and real estate industry.

Won't the proposed ordinance hurt business owners as paper bags, on average cost more than plastic? How can the impact of any added cost to businesses be remedied?

The ordinance permits businesses to charge for paper bags. This practice is encouraged as it will allow businesses to recover any additional costs associated with providing paper bags while also encouraging customers to use reusable bags. Businesses may also consider offering customers a small discount for using reusable bags. Businesses can explore promotional opportunities of the new policy through reusable bag giveaways (with logo of business) with certain qualifying purchases. While there could be an increased upfront cost to some local businesses of providing paper versus plastic bags, a desired and anticipated long-term consequence of the ordinance is that the increased use of reusable bags will result in a cost savings to businesses on Block Island.

Why not offer plastic bags, but charge for them instead?

The goal of this ordinance is to reduce overall plastic bag use, and bans are often better than fees in achieving this goal.

When does the ordinance go into effect? Can businesses be allowed to use remaining stock of plastic bags?

The Planning Board has been discussing a plastic bag reduction ordinance during public meetings since December of 2016. The ordinance will take effect January 1, 2018 and business establishments would be required to comply as of that date. One option may be to donate remaining stock of plastic bags to a nonprofit organization that can utilize the bags to distribute food, grocery products, clothing, or other household items.

How will the ordinance be enforced?

It is not anticipated that much cost or municipal resources would be required for enforcement of this ordinance. Enforcement will likely be complaint driven. The ordinance does not specify a specific municipal department or staff person responsible for enforcement of the plastic bag ordinance. Therefore, the Town Manager would be given the flexibility to determine the appropriate department/staff person. Typically communities elect to designate the Police Department as the enforcement agency.

What is the penalty for violation of the ordinance?

The goal is not to be punitive and we do not anticipate that significant enforcement will be necessary or cause a burden on Town resources. As adopted, for simplicity, the ordinance refers to the General Penalty of the Code which means that businesses that do not comply could face a fine of up to \$500 and imprisonment.

Is it possible to restrict PeaPod from delivering groceries to the island in plastic bags?

This may be beyond the Town of New Shoreham's jurisdiction, however, the Town can and should continue to explore its options. Since the plastic bag public hearing in October, town staff have been reaching out to Stop & Shop, PeaPod and nearby local communities regarding this issue. Initial response from PeaPod to town staff is that they are a web-based company and local regulations, such as a plastic bag ban, may not apply. Several calls made to discuss the issue with Stop & Shop corporate staff were not returned. Narragansett is currently exploring a plastic bag ban and anticipates having a workshop with the Town Council in the end of 2017. They are aware of our question / concern regarding PeaPod service to Block Island using plastic bags and have said they will consider this when researching and crafting their local ordinance. While New Shoreham's ordinance alone may not be able to restrict PeaPod from using plastic bags to deliver goods to the island, the Town and island customers may be able to make the company change its practice through Council request and local customer requests.

Are there exceptions to this ban?

Yes, the restriction is only on single-use plastic carryout bags provided by a business establishment to a customer at the point of sale. A notable exemption includes barrier bags which are the small thin plastic bags typically found inside a grocery store for customers to collect unwrapped/unpackaged fruit, vegetables, nuts, and grains or to collect small hardware items, or to contain unwrapped prepared foods such as bakery goods. Plastic barrier bags can and are also often used to wrap fresh or frozen foods such as meat or fish, whether packaged or not. Barrier bags can and are also used to wrap flowers, potted plants, or other items where damage to a good or contamination of other goods placed together in the same bag may be a problem. Other exemptions provided for in the ordinance include double-opening bags (typically used by dry cleaners), bags measuring larger than 28 x 36 inches, and plastic bags of a

minimum thickness of 4 mils. Hopefully businesses will attempt to embrace the intent and purpose of the ordinance for plastic reduction and that these exemptions do not result in loopholes.

Do reusable bags harbour germs?

There are no credible studies making a connection between reusable bags and foodborne illness. Using common sense, washing your hands, and washing your reusable bags when they get dirty, will significantly reduce any risk of illness. Also, the ordinance does not ban stores from offering plastic barrier bags.

What communities have plastic bag bans or similar regulations in place?

Communities regulating plastic bags at business checkout is not new to many parts of the world. In the United States, bans have been implemented at various levels of government, such as local (Austin, TX, Cambridge, MA, Seattle, WA), county (all counties in Hawaii), and state (California). In 1994, Denmark became the first country to charge people for using plastic bags and many other European countries have followed suit with a tax on plastic bags that is directed to environmental funds. Many countries around the world have been phasing out single-use plastic shopping bags. Kenya is the latest country to ban plastic bags and at least a dozen African nations now have bans or required fees. Bangladesh instituted a ban in response to flooding caused by plastic bags.

Barrington, RI was the first community in Rhode Island to institute a ban on single-use plastic bags in 2012. The towns of Middletown and Jamestown and City of Newport adopted bans in 2017. The Portsmouth Town Council will be voting on their proposed ordinance this November – which, if passed, would mean a plastic bag ban for all of Aquidneck Island. Local Conservation Commissions in Bristol and Narragansett are exploring plastic bag bans, as well as, the Planning Department in South Kingstown. The New Shoreham draft ordinance is modeling very closely to what has been implemented successfully in Barrington and what has been adopted in Newport, Middletown, and Jamestown.

What if I forget my reusable bags?

Getting used to new habits takes a little time and practice. If you forget your reusable bag, many stores may offer paper bags for customers. Keep reusable bags in your car and tuck a small, collapsible bag into your backpack or purse or attach one to your keychain for quick shopping trips. Pretty soon, bringing your own reusable bags into stores will become second nature.

Do customers need to bring bags that meet the definition of reusable bags as specified in the ordinance?

No, the ordinance only regulates what businesses provide to the customer at checkout. Customers may use any bag they would like to take their goods out of the store. There is nothing in the ordinance that prohibits customers from bringing their own bags of any type to take home their groceries or other purchases.

Where can I get reusable bags?

Reusable bags are widely available for purchase at select retail stores, grocery markets, and online retailers. Many organizations and businesses offer such bags through promotions and events for free. Don't overlook the bags you already have in your home or office, such as tote bags made of canvas.

Isn't this ordinance too limited to make a difference?

This ordinance will not solve the plastics problem, but it is one small step towards making a difference at the individual and local community level by raising awareness and sending a message about what Block Island values. We may not be able to calculate the exact and total difference the policy will make locally, however, even a small reduction in litter and reduced risk of ingestion and death to Block Island wildlife, many would argue, is worth any potential added inconvenience.