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Preventing Disposable Bag Pollution in Stamford

Make the Switch to Reusable Bags!

Like many communities across the nation and the globe, concern is growing in Stamford about pollution caused by single-use plastic and paper bags, which are costly, environmentally harmful, and completely unnecessary. Single-use bags are only used for an average of 12 minutes, but have impacts on our environment that can last for generations.

The Problem with Disposable Bags- The free distribution of single-use checkout bags comes with significant economic and environmental costs to the City of Stamford:

- *Littering our Community*: Plastic bags never fully break down; they litter our parks, neighborhoods, beaches, roads, and waterways. It is estimated that nearly a billion plastic bags are used in Connecticut every year.

- *Costing Consumers and Taxpayers:* ***There is no such thing as a free disposable bag!*** U.S. retailers spend roughly $4 billion on disposable bags per year—a cost that is passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices. Municipalities are also spending millions of dollars annually to clean up and dispose of plastic bags. Plastic bags can also cost recycling facilities hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional costs every year due to contamination and jamming of recycling machines caused by the bags.

- *Wasting Natural Resources:* Producing the more than 100 billion plastic bags that are thrown away in U.S. every year requires approximately 2.2 billion pounds of fossil fuels and 3.9 billion gallons of fresh water, while producing over 1 billion pounds of solid waste and emitting more than 2.7 million tons of CO_2.

- *The Problem with Paper:* Unfortunately, paper bags also have significant adverse impacts on the environment. Producing paper bags consumes approximately 14 million trees annually in the U.S., and requires more energy and water to produce than plastic bags.

- *Polluting Waterways and Harming Wildlife:* Recent studies have found high levels of plastics polluting our oceans. Plastic bags never fully break down, instead, they *photo degrade* into tiny pieces. Fish and wildlife often mistake tiny plastic pieces for food and consume them, or become ensnared in plastic debris. At least 267 marine and avian species are adversely impacted by pollution from plastic bags.

- *Clogging Storm Drains:* Disposable bags often end up as unsightly litter in our communities. When it rains, this litter is easily swept into storm drains where they could lead to blockages, causing infrastructure damage and potentially localized flooding.

More than 800 million single-use plastic bags are consumed in Connecticut each year

Implementing Local Bag Laws: The Solution to Bag Pollution!

While voluntary actions by consumers are a good first step, education alone has not resulted in a significant change in disposable bag use, or an increase in reusable bag use. Over 200 local governments across the nation have enacted policies to reduce disposable bag use and incentivize the cost effective and environmentally friendly alternative: reusable bags. While the approach may vary slightly from place to place, some policies have proven extremely effective in curbing single-use bag consumption, while others have fallen short.

Many of the earliest communities to attempt to curb single-use bag pollution adopted a straight ban on plastic bags (sometimes referred to as a "first generation" bag ban), without addressing paper bags. This approach often resulted in consumer behavior shifting towards paper bag use, which adversely impacted the environment. **The goal is not to switch from plastic to paper; the goal is to switch from disposable to reusable.**

Other communities have opted for a five (5) to ten (10) cent fee on single-use paper and plastic bags at the checkout counter. This approach is preferred by the grocer's industry, as it allows retailers to keep plastic bags available for a fee. *A fee-based approach helps create a financial incentive for consumers to make the switch to reusable bags, but it may not fully eliminate the presence of plastic bags in the environment.* A local law in Suffolk County, NY recently instituted a 5-cent fee on plastic and paper bags and resulted in a drop in plastic bag use from 70% to 30%, while reusable bag grew from 5% to 45%, in just a few months. The fee is designed to change public behavior to incentivize the public to bring their own bags.

Ban/Fee Hybrid: The Most Effective Policy Solution for Eliminating Plastic Bags

Also known as a "second generation" bag ban; the ban/fee model is highly effective at changing consumer behavior by banning single-use plastic bags and charging a fee paper bags. We support this hybrid approach for the City of Stamford, as it eliminates plastic checkout bags and creates a financial incentive for consumers to use reusable bags instead of paper. *Los Angeles, CA achieved a 94% overall reduction in single-use bag use (including a 30% drop in paper bags) after adopting a ban on plastic bags and a ten cent fee on paper and other bags at the checkout counter!*

To Whom Does This Law Apply?

"Covered stores" or "retail establishments" are typically defined as grocery stores, pharmacies, convenience stores, food marts, hardware stores, and other retail establishments engaged in the sale of personal and household consumer items. These definitions may or may not include farmer's market vendors and delicatessens, but typically do not include restaurants, church groups, tag sales, and non-profit organizations.

What Kinds of Plastic Bags are Covered by the Ban/Fee Hybrid Law?

Most ordinances define single-use plastic bags as "any bag other than a reusable bag provided at a checkout counter, point of sale, or other location for the purpose of carrying food or merchandise out of a retail establishment." These plastic bags typically range from 0.5 mils to 3 mils and only last for one or two uses before they will be discarded.

Many ordinances allow retailers to carry recyclable paper bags or high density "reusable" plastic bags, although the consumer must pay a minimum fee for these bags. Reusable bags made from plastic are usually defined in the ordinances at a minimum of 3 mils in thickness, although the recently approved ordinance of Greenwich, CT, set the minimum thickness at 12 mil in order to prevent stores from providing "reusable" plastic bags that in reality will likely not be reused.

So-called "Compostable" or "biodegradable" plastic bags (bags made from cellulose or plant feedstock) only break down under very specific conditions. They may continue to threaten aquatic life and/or create costly infrastructure impairments, and should, in our opinion, therefore be included in the ban. Plastic bags for food packaging, dry-goods, produce, raw meat, dry cleaning and newspapers are typically not included in a ban.

Where Does the Revenue Go?

Most local ordinances require businesses to establish a charge of five (5) or ten (10) cents on disposable bags, which the retailer keeps. In Connecticut, communities need enabling legislation to be passed by the state in order to redirect the fee to be used to support environmental programs and other local initiatives, such as investing in parks, supporting municipal infrastructure improvements, and protecting water quality.