

Notes for address to the House Natural Resources Committee

Tim Maciel
Brattleboro, VT

April 4, 2018

Brattleboro residents passed a non-binding petition to ban plastic bags by an overwhelming vote of 3:1. I collected most of the signatures to place this on the ballot and the comment I heard most often was, “This is so long overdue!”

I first approached my own state rep on this issue back in 2012, 5 years after San Francisco banned them in 2007. I know your committee proposed a ban back in 2012, too, and this year I hope it finally passes. It is, indeed, long overdue.

Brattleboro passed it for several reasons, three in particular: environmental, economic, and cultural.

Environmental Impact

First, a few comments about the environmental impact of plastic bags on the planet.

The UN has called for a war on plastic bags to save our oceans. The UN Environmental Programme launched the CleanSeas campaign to end marine litter. The goal is to stop useage of single use plastic bags by 2022. They say that at our current rate of pollution, there will be MORE PLASTIC BAGS IN OUR OCEANS THAN FISH within the next 30 yeasers. More plastic than fish!

Of course, Vermont does not have a coastline, but we do eat fish and the UN reports that plastic bags - which never really biodegrade - do eventually break down into petro-polymers which are rapidly getting into our food chain.

Erik Solheim, head of the UN Environmental Programme, said, "It is past time that we tackle the plastic problem that blights our oceans. Plastic pollution is surfing up onto Indonesian beaches, settling onto the ocean floors of the North Pole, and rising through the food chain onto our dinner tables. We've stood by too long as the problem has gotten worse. It must stop."

Each year more than 8 million tons of plastic ends up in our oceans - wreaking havoc on marine wildlife, fisheries and tourism and costing at least 8 billion dollars in damage to marine ecosystems.

Up to 80% of all litter in our oceans is made up of plastic!

At our current rate, by 2050, in addition to having more plastic than fish in our seas, 99% of seabirds will have ingested plastic. Thanks to Exxon Mobil which introduced plastic bags back in 1976.

Other facts:

- Over 300 species of marine life - sea turtles to sperm whales - die from ingestion of plastic.

- Plastic is a substance which the earth cannot digest and every bit of plastic ever created still exists.

Economic Impact

But let's talk about the economic impact. In the growing number of municipalities across the country that have some kind of ban on plastic bags, there is NO evidence whatsoever that there has been a negative impact on businesses. In fact, there is clear evidence that retail stores would SAVE money on the cost of plastic bags by having their customers use reuseable bags.

And then there is the cost of oil consumption. The energy needed to manufacture just a dozen bags could drive a car a mile, and consider that we as a planet produce over a trillion of these things every year!

Looking at the broader picture, the NYT (2007) reported that 100 billion bags used in this country require 12 million barrels of oil - not including transportation costs. 12 BILLION BARRELS OF OIL EACH YEAR.

A common question, though, is the impact that a ban would have on low-income families. Bags designed to be reuseable can be purchased for as little as a dime and even more durable bags, ones that last for years, are available for less than a dolloar. Whole Foods sells them for 3 for \$2.00 and some establishments give them away for free. Here in Brattleboro we're working on free cloth bags to be given out that are sponsored by our local banks and stores. The fact is, however, that the cost of plastic bags is definitely passed onto the

consumer and so we would all save if everyone converted to reusables.

MYTH: Reuseable bags cause disease. There is no evidence at all to support this claim.

The American Progressive Bag Alliance argues that 100% of plastic bags are recyclable, but the fact is that far fewer than 3% of Americans ever recycle them and they do cause havoc in normal recycling centers, clogging up machinery.

And what about Paper Bags? The American Forest and Paper Association claim that a fee on paper bags would cost American millions. But, again, our goal is not to transition back to paper, but to transition to reuseable bags just as people have done in European countries and many African, Asian and S. American countries. And just as Americans have done in a host of towns and cities across America.

In fact, our neighbor to the south, Massachusetts, is on the verge of banning them statewide after Boston Andover 50 other municipalities passed some form of ban.

The final argument is more of a political or philosophical one. Some say that a ban takes away from their personal choice and also argue that we have too much government regulation anyway.

However, it was government regulation that eliminated DDT as a pesticide, that banned Freon that was responsible for shrinking the ozone layer (that is now coming back). IT is government regulation that led to cigarette bans in public places, catalytic converters, and seat belts. I don't think this committee needs any reminder that good environmental regulations do good things and not regulating can lead to irreversible harm.

Look, plastic bags WILL eventually be banned across the country, so why should Vermont wait any longer? We live in New England where people adapt to and embrace progressive change. Surely we can adapt to a ban on plastic bags just as well as, say, pet owners in LA, grocery stores in Cape Cod, or food merchants in D.C. Single use plastic bags were a bad idea from the beginning, so I urge this committee to finally ban them in Vermont. Plastic bags just are not who we are. I have had so many friends and family visit from California, Chicago and DC and they are astounded that we haven't banned them yet. So please don't put this off any longer and ban them in our state.

Thank you for your time. Questions?