

Plastic Bag Ban To Be Debated At Town Meetings Across Vermont

By [JOHN DILLON](#) 2/28/2019

Vic Guadagno from Montpelier says it's easy to bring your own bag to the supermarket.



Town meeting debate in several towns next week may turn to trash talk. Trash, that is, in the form of single-use plastic bags. Communities from Manchester to Burlington are considering measures that could lead to local bag bans.

Lawmakers in Montpelier hope the town meeting votes will add momentum to their efforts to pass a statewide ban.

A very informal survey of shoppers outside the Shaw's supermarket in Montpelier didn't turn up many fans of the ubiquitous throwaway plastic bag.

Vic Guadagno set down his own reusable bag to talk to a reporter.

"Of course, we can be more responsible. It's a good place to start, with a bag. Recycle a bag. All we need is like five bags at home," he said. "Bring them, bring them back"

In November, Montpelier voters overwhelmingly approved a resolution seeking a charter change to ban the sale of single-use plastic bags.

Montpelier followed Brattleboro, which last year became the first Vermont town to prohibit the single use bags. Burlington next week will consider an advisory measure on the issue. Town Meeting votes will also be held in Middlebury and Manchester.

Montpelier Mayor Anne Watson says the local activism helps show lawmakers that there's support building for efforts to reduce plastic pollution.

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“So I don’t mind being out front here, and saying this is worth looking into,” she said. “And if we can be a pilot for the state, that’s perfectly fine.”

And action from the grassroots is exactly what Addison Sen. Christopher Bray wants to see. Bray chairs the Senate Natural Resources Committee and he’s sponsored legislation that would prohibit the plastic bags, forms of polystyrene food containers, and single-use plastic straws.

Bray said legislative staff have looked at the issue statewide, and estimate that some dozen communities consider some form of bag ban by the end of the year.

“In the case of Middlebury, there are kids from the elementary school, middle school, high school, college and then townspeople all working together on this project,” Bray said. “So to me, it’s a case of grassroots democracy building a change that people want to see.”

But an advocate for the state’s retailers and grocers said complying with dozens of different local ordinances would be a nightmare for businesses. Erin Sigrist, president of the Vermont Retailers and Grocers Association, said her members realize that a bag ban is likely coming. But they’d like to see it done statewide, not town-by-town.

Sigrist supports a bill that’s now being drafted that would levy a five cent fee on paper or plastic bags. The bill also bans plastic bags in 2020, but would allow stores to keep the fee to cover the higher cost of the paper bag.

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“We don’t love it [the ban] in the sense that we like to provide the convenience to our members and their customers. But we understand that it’s coming,” she said. “And again, we don’t support a patchwork of bans around the state, so we feel that this is the best path forward.”

Middlebury may be the next town to ban bags. Maggie Eaton has worked on the issue since last spring. She says she was surprised after moving back to Vermont from California that the Green Mountain State – known for its environmental activism – had not taken steps to limit plastic pollution.

“The environmental damage has been evident for decades,” she said. “These plastic bags escape into the environment, and whether they get stuck in the fields or stuck in the waterways or end up in the oceans and the islands, there are animals that are dying because of it.”

Eaton said the bags – made from fossil fuels – rarely get recycled, and thus break down into smaller and smaller particles that spread throughout the environment.

They may not get recycled. But people do reuse the bags. And that’s why Montpelier resident Sheryll Rappaport is a bit ambivalent about a ban.

“Because I reuse them all the time,” she said. “I reuse them to fill my garbage pail. I give things to people, just, you know, to carry something. It’s a tough question.”

Standing outside Shaw’s, with yes, a reusable bag, Rappaport said she does think plastic pollution is a global problem.

“When you see what’s in the oceans, it’s beyond heartbreaking,” she said. “And I see all the people drinking out of their water bottles, drives me crazy. But it’s a dilemma because I think the plastic bags are good, but I’m sure they do some damage too, so I’m torn.”

That tension between convenience and concern for the environment will continue to play out at the Statehouse and at town meetings on Tuesday.