

Students seek plastic bag bans

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Pemetic Elementary School eighth-graders Logan Wilbur, left, and Charlotte Partin present their service learning project focused on banning single-use plastic bags to the Tremont Board of Selectmen on Monday. Islander photo by Sarah Hinckley.

SOUTHWEST HARBOR — Eighth-grader Caroline Musson, 14, challenged the Tremont Board of Selectmen Monday to pause a minute the next time they are at the grocery store to count how many plastic bags go out the door.

“Is this really what we want tourists to see when they visit our island?” asked Ella Izenour, also 14, and one of four students at Pemetic Elementary School who recently initiated the MDI Plastic Project.

In their third public appearance to promote pushing single-use plastic bags off the island, the students of Bonnie Norwood’s science class presented their case to the Tremont Board of Selectmen. The group is encouraging officials in all four MDI towns to present plastic-bag-ban ordinances to their voters next year.

Earlier Monday evening, the group made the same presentation to the Mount Desert selectmen, who subsequently voted to support drafting an ordinance for next year's town meeting that prohibits the use of plastic bags in local establishments.

Gordon Beck, a member of Mount Desert's Sustainability Committee, said some businesses already have been considering getting rid of plastic and plastic foam items.

"They're gung-ho to do it," he said. "They really want to take the right steps. And they said, 'Please, do an ordinance, because that will back us up.'"

Tom Reeve, director of the Mount Desert Chamber of Commerce, said he has heard the same thing.

"It's a nice shield for them," he said.

In May, the group premiered its service learning project focused on banning plastic bags at the Southwest Harbor town meeting.

"When we presented at town meeting, we thought that was big," said Charlotte Partin. After the presentation, they were encouraged to go to the other towns on the island.

Members of the Southwest Harbor Board of Selectmen have been active in supporting the project, particularly Selectman Lydia Goetze, who met with the students to discuss the timeline and format of a town ordinance.

Students in Norwood's class are required to create a service learning project that reflects issues affecting their community. When the four students began their project, they weren't sure of their focus. Trash was an issue they wanted to tackle, but they hadn't decided whether to concentrate their work on their town, their school or the issue of trash in the ocean.

"Then, we realized those are all connected," said student Logan Wilbur. "We weren't sure which angle we wanted to go."

After more discussion and coaching from Norwood, the group narrowed its scope to plastics. Realizing that was also a big bite to digest in an environment rife with restaurants and retail, the group set its sights on single-use plastic bags.

During the quiet winter months, the students began calling businesses that were open to ask what they thought about a bag ban.

Izenour said some of those phone calls were not well received. "I remember thinking, whoa, there's an issue because people are hanging up on me," she said. Some businesses have already removed single-use plastic bags from circulation, the girls said.

“We’re not trying to tell people what to do,” said Wilbur, who is in the process of drafting an ordinance for Southwest Harbor with her group. “It’s our future, and it’s something we need to fight for.”

They admit they were surprised not to be the first to come up with this idea. California banned single-use plastic bags in 2016. There are 14 other towns in Maine that have already banned single-use plastic bags, including Portland, Freeport and Blue Hill.

“Once people start to make a change, then others see, oh, this is possible,” said Izenour. She and her group have been reviewing ban ordinances in other parts of the state to figure out how best to craft one locally.

“The best thing is seeing how empowered these girls are,” said Norwood, noting there are several aspects of service learning projects, including civic engagement. It’s important “to have students be aware of their own town government and how to get an ordinance [crafted]. I’m learning too.”

This group of students soon will move on to the high school and are planning to pass their project on to some enthusiastic students coming into eighth-grade next year. Before then, they plan to put together a draft of an ordinance for Southwest Harbor to move forward on a plastic bag ban.

The nonprofit organization A Climate to Thrive also is supporting this project, Norwood said. That group is sponsoring movies and other education programs about the topic.

“I thought it was really hard to make a difference in a community,” said Partin. “It turned out to be easier than what I thought it would be. It is possible. It is possible to make a difference.”

Visit MDIPlasticProject.org.

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