

## Students push for change, reflect on lessons learned

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*Mount Desert Island High School students, from left, Ella Izenour, Logan Wilbur, Charlotte Partin, and Caroline Musson have been attending meetings in towns across the island to introduce proposed ordinances aimed at reducing waste by banning single-use plastic carryout bags and polystyrene containers from local businesses.*

*(Islander photo: Becky Pritchard)*

Note: the editing changes that were used to convert this online version to the print version are indicated below as lighter text for deleted material and *italics* for added material.

BAR HARBOR — Ella Izenour, Caroline Musson, Charlotte Partin, and Logan Wilbur have been working since 2017 to reduce waste on Mount Desert Island by banning single-use plastic carryout bags and polystyrene (or Styrofoam) containers from local businesses.

Town by town, the ninth-graders from Southwest Harbor have been talking to selectmen and town councilors to explain why their proposed ordinance should be adopted by each town. They also met with local business owners.

With the help of a supportive science teacher, Bonnie Norwood, and volunteers affiliated with the local nonprofit A Climate to Thrive (ACTT), the student activists have been getting results.

Southwest Harbor voters adopted ordinances in November to ban single-use plastic shopping bags and polystyrene containers.

In Bar Harbor, public hearings on similar ordinances are set for Jan. 15.

Mount Desert selectmen are entertaining the idea and Tremont selectmen began discussing it this week.

The plastic bag ordinance adopted by Southwest Harbor voters provides that “no store . . . shall provide or sell a single-use carryout bag to a customer at a checkout stand, cash register, point-of-sale or other point of departure for the purpose of transporting any goods or merchandise out of the establishment.”

Stores may make a reusable or paper bag available either free or for a fee.

Bar Harbor is considering a similar ordinance, though it has been modified to remove the exclusion of nonprofit and religious groups. Town councilors wanted all retailers to be held to the same standard.

“Somebody who sells something is a retailer,” councilor Erin Cough said at the Dec. 4 council meeting. “And if you’re going to ban them [single-use carryout plastic bags], I say ban them all the way.”

Unlike in the other MDI towns, in Bar Harbor the adoption of the new ordinances does not require a town meeting vote. An affirmative town council vote following the public hearing is enough to enact the ordinances, which would take effect one month after the vote.

The language of these two ordinances, though, includes a grace period through December 2019 in order to allow businesses to use up their existing stock of bags. The proposed ban on polystyrene containers has also been modified in Bar Harbor to have the same effective date as the single-use carryout plastic bag ban.

The students said they are often recognized around the island now because of their work, and in part because of coverage in the *Islander*.

Musson said the attention they’ve gotten has been “overwhelmingly positive,” though they sometimes talk to people who disagree with what they’re doing.

“A lot of people have heard we’re banning [all] plastic,” Musson said. She’s quick to clarify that that’s not the case.

“What about trash bags?” is a question Wilbur said she gets. When she explains what she and her fellow students are really aiming for: a focused ban on single-use carryout bags and polystyrene, she usually finds points of agreement with whoever she’s talking to.

All four student activists said they have learned a lot about local government in the past year, as they have presented their proposals at meetings.

“None of us had been to a town meeting before,” Izenour said.

“It was a lot less formal or intimidating than we thought it would be,” added Partin. She described town councilors and selectmen as “normal people,” and that speaking before them has been “a huge confidence booster.”

Wilbur agreed that getting involved in local politics was a positive direction to take. “Before this, I felt kind of helpless. I asked people what I could do to make a difference.”

The answer she often got was to “vote for the right people.”

For a young person years away from voting age, that answer is not immediately helpful. Partin said she was lucky to have a teacher in eighth grade who helped her and other students learn how to organize to make a difference.

*The students' mission started out as an eighth-grade service learning project in Bonnie Norwood's science class at Pemetic Elementary School, but they continued working on their service project long after the class ended last June. They credit their teacher with providing them the tools needed to take their project out beyond the classroom.*

The goal of changing ordinances across the island started out as an eighth-grade service learning project in Norwood's science class at Pemetic Elementary School. The class had divided into three groups to brainstorm different problems to solve through a service project. The three proposed problems to work on, Izenour said, were “waste in our school, waste in our town, and waste in the ocean.”

When the class came together to discuss the three ideas, students determined that all three problems could be tackled at once by convincing island towns to ban single-use plastic shopping bags and Styrofoam containers. That would cut down on waste in all the areas identified.

Izenour, Musson, Partin, and Wilbur continued working on their service project long after the class ended last June. They credit their teacher with providing them the tools needed to take their project from the classroom into municipal buildings and meeting halls.

“She really motivated us to go further,” Partin said.

“She knew what steps we needed to take,” explained Izenour. These steps included talking to businesses for input, writing proposed ordinances with the help of knowledgeable adults (including ACTT volunteers and town officials), and finally taking their proposals to town government officials and voters.

Wilbur described talking to business owners as “the thing I leaned the most from.” Business owners had practical insights on how to make the ordinances work for them.

For example, Izenour said an early draft of the ordinance stated that businesses would charge a 15-cent fee for paper bags. Some business owners said they were concerned they would lose

business to shops in towns that had no fee. So they changed the ordinance to make the fee optional.

*Other business owners said* Other feedback the students heard from business owners was that some would welcome an ordinance to make it easier to explain to their customers why they were switching from plastic to a more sustainable option, said Wilbur.

Partin said she has found it useful working with the ACTT volunteers who helped the students write the proposed ordinances.

“Since we’re young, it’s really hard to find the words,” she said.

According to these students, working together is the key to getting things done. “Find something you’re passionate about, and get other likeminded people,” suggested Wilbur. “Start small and simple, and build up. See what groups are doing the same things.”

“Collaborate with them,” Musson added.

“And it’s important to make sure everyone’s on the same page,” Wilbur continued.

The lessons they’ve learned in communication, collaboration, and public presentation have gotten the students to start thinking of their own possible futures. Izenour said she wants to “do more in activism,” and Wilbur agreed.

“I know I’ll do something in activism,” Wilbur said. “This helps me sleep at night. It’s good to know I’m doing something.”

Musson and Partin said they are both looking into politics as a possible career.

“I do consider the idea of going into [politics],” Partin said. “Doing this kind of thing does feel good: that we can change things, and it’s helping.” *Partin said.*

### **ACTT summit**

Izenour, Musson, Partin, and Wilbur will be among the presenters at A Climate to Thrive’s 2019 winter summit, “Building a Brighter Future: Stepping Up to the Climate Change Challenge,” Sunday, Feb. 10 from 2:30-5 p.m. at MDI High School.

“Next Steps with Plastics” is one of the many items on the agenda.

“The event will showcase the many ways that MDI is becoming a model for sustainability and some exciting new opportunities for taking our vision statewide,” organizers said. “Community members will have an opportunity to share new ideas and help plan the next steps to keep the momentum going.”

The program will feature two keynote speakers as several shorter “success stories by local residents and community leaders,” workshops, and time for networking “while learning and thinking together while enjoying delicious local food and music.”

Matt Prindiville, director of the national organization Upstream, will speak about solutions to stop plastic pollution. Phil Coupe, co-founder of ReVision Energy, will discuss how a 100 percent renewable energy future is possible with technology that is available today.

Contact ACTT at 664-4040 or visit [www.aclimatetothrive.org](http://www.aclimatetothrive.org) for more information and volunteer opportunities.

Note: The ACTT Summit was covered more fully (not related to the students) in another article in the same print edition of the Mount Desert Islander.