

Mount Desert Islander

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Mount Desert Island High School students, from left, Ella Izenour, Logan Wilbur, Charlotte Partin and Caroline Musson have spearheaded an effort in MDI towns to ban single-use plastic carryout bags and polystyrene containers from local businesses. The Bar Harbor Town council enacted the new ordinances Tuesday.

Student activists reflect

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. They also met with local business owners.

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

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 Pemetec 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.

"She really motivated us to go further," Partin said.

Wilbur described talking to business owners as "the thing I leaned the most from." Business owners had practical ideas about 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 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," Wilbur said. "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 speaking have gotten the students to start thinking of their own possible futures. Izenour said she wants to "do more in activism," and Wilbur agreed.

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

"Doing this kind of thing does feel good," Partin said.