

Commentary

Editorials

Returning to re-use

“It’s a ripple effect,” said Caroline Musson, a Mount Desert Island High School freshman.

Quoted last week in Northeastern University’s Experience magazine, Musson observed that, “If one person starts to do something, then the people around them will start to do something.”

Musson is one of the group of “plastics kids” who last year led an island-wide push to ban single-use carryout plastic bags and polystyrene containers. The ordinances for which they advocated have been adopted in Southwest Harbor and Bar Harbor and will be voted on in Mount Desert and Tremont this month.

At least two such ripples from their work are in the news now. One is the Experience magazine article itself, which was originally titled “How one small island is going zero-everything.” On reflection, the editors gave it the headline, “This small island is taking on a big problem — climate change.”

For local residents, whether or not they’re involved with A Climate to Thrive, the story provided an outside perspective on the remarkable progress that has been made in a few short years.

Another ripple is the statewide bag ban.

Twenty municipalities already have some sort of plastic bag ban on the books. At the public hearing before the Energy and Natural Resources Committee April 24, business leaders said they support the bill, partly thanks to the local bans.

“Our retailers at first were wary, but now that they’ve seen them in action, customers have adapted and they’ve been okay with it,” said Curtis Picard, presi-

dent of the Retail Association of Maine.

Adam Reny, part owner of Reny’s, said it has been a challenge keeping up with the differences among the local ordinances. He said one rule applicable statewide would bring welcome consistency.

A few folks do bristle at being asked to change their shopping habits. Some plastic grocery bags certainly go get reused, especially for dog waste.

But as Matt Prindiville of Upstream pointed out at this year’s A Climate to Thrive summit, our habits of using disposable items have evolved quickly and they certainly can evolve again.

It was only about 40 years ago that “to-go” became a big thing. The first McDonald’s drive through opened in 1975, Prindiville said. Today, Starbucks Coffee goes through 4 billion disposable cups per year. With volumes like that, recycling and compostable plastics are not the best solution. Far better to find reusable items we’re willing to keep and live with.

Shopping bags are a start; each household is getting to know which bags they like to use and how to remember to keep them handy. What if, as Prindiville suggested, we continued that momentum and started carrying reusable to-go containers, not just for coffee but also for that burger or salad at lunch, or leftovers from dinner out? Restaurants could have them available, too, like reusable shopping bags. A system could be designed for containers to be returned, cleaned and made available again.

As with glass milk bottles, a wholesale shift away from disposable will be a healthy move back — to the future.