

Editorial: Ripple effect

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Southwest Harbor recently became the first Mount Desert Island town to limit the use of single-use plastic bags and polystyrene food containers. Others seem likely to follow suit.

Some businesses have already switched their bag and to-go food supplies. And many consumers have been using reusable bags, coffee cups and other items for years. But the ordinance in Southwest and other towns, intended as an education tool rather than a crackdown, will be the nudge many others need to get off the fence.

Businesses, one Mount Desert Sustainability Committee member said in the summer, are “gung-ho to do it. They really want to take the right steps.” Several business owners have said an ordinance would provide “cover” or a “shield” to make the change if there was initial surprise or pushback from the public.

The new rule won’t solve big problems like plastic pollution in the ocean and the collapsing recycling market, or even regional ones like a year-long delay in a new trash processing facility.

But it will put a spotlight on business and household behaviors and choices that do, in aggregate, very much effect the big environmental picture. A growing body of research emphasizes the importance of behavior change in addressing climate change. Making a change in how we carry groceries is a low-risk, low-cost step that may make a modest difference but may also inspire more dramatic efforts.

The plastic bag ban was a grassroots effort, sparked last spring by a small group of then-eighth-grade students and their science teacher. They did their homework. They consulted with the chamber of commerce. They interviewed business owners about what would be palatable to them. They made presentations to the board of selectmen, at pre-election workshops, and at libraries.

“I thought it was really hard to make a difference in a community,” one of the students said in June, as the project was picking up steam. “It turned out to be easier than what I thought it would be. It is possible. It is possible to make a difference.”

Kudos to the students, the volunteers who assisted with research and drafting, to A Climate to Thrive for organizing and outreach, and to the voters for supporting this positive step.