

Letter to Editor: Ban single use plastic bags and polystyrene containers

Daron Collins

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To the Editor:

I encourage Bar Harbor residents to participate in the town's public hearing on a proposed ordinance to ban single use plastic bags and polystyrene containers, 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 15 in the Town Hall. I enthusiastically support the ordinance and hope other residents will get behind the initiative.

How these single-use, polyethylene, blown-film-extrusion, t-shirt style bags came to dominate the market is an interesting story. They were the brainchild of the Swedish engineer Sten Gustaf Thulin, who came up with the design in the 1960s just as plastics were infiltrating every corner of our lives. Georgia's Dixie Bag Company got a hold of the patent in 1977. The Kroeger and Safeway supermarket chains introduced the bags in 1982, but it took the petrochemical lobby and the American Progressive Bag Alliance a decade to convince consumers to abandon paper for plastic.

Admittedly, the bags in question are good at what they were designed to do. They're also cheap and we've come up with some other ways to use them, although the claim that they make good emergency windbreakers seems far-fetched. Their very design is what makes them particularly problematic for a community like ours. Airy and with handles, they travel well in the wind and get caught in everything from tree limbs to whale baleen.

We are a community that depends economically on the ecological integrity and aesthetics of our surroundings — anything we can do to reduce trash, the better. We are also surrounded by water which is filled with majestic marine mammals, including the endangered North Atlantic Right Whale. Explore “plastic bag whale stomach” online, and I think you'll agree that anything we can do to avoid those heinous scenarios would be good as well.

Eliminating single-use bags and polystyrene (“Styrofoam”) containers is not going to be the silver bullet of our waste problems and wasteful habits. They don't amount to a huge proportion of our landfill waste and they're not significant sources of microplastic pollution. But prohibiting these bags would send an important message to the plastics industry as a whole, would help clean up unsightly and dangerous litter in our environment, and would move the needle in reducing plastics more generally.

No longer having these bags at our beck and call may sting a little. But it stung a bit when we moved away from those plastic six-pack rings and incandescent light bulbs, when we realized it was important to separate trash from recycling from compost, and when we decided that smoking on airplanes wasn't a good idea. Such constraints can also fuel creativity and cooperation. When we eliminate these bags, for example, I think it's extremely important we pay

special attention to those in our community who can't simply drop \$2.99 for a reusable bag every time they forget their own. For one, paper bags can be a last resort. Or, preferably, we can rally around a bag share program. I have no doubt that we have the spirit of cooperation and plenty of reusable cotton, paper, canvas, rayon, and linen bags in circulation to keep us all outfitted.

Let's follow the lead of Southwest Harbor and listen to the voices of the students from our island who have so creatively and persuasively encouraged us to drop our single-use plastic bag habit.

Darron Collins,
Bar Harbor