



## BANNING PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Plastic and paper “single-use” shopping bags have become a staple of shopping in our country. Connecticut residents use approximately 400 million plastic bags annually, carrying them home from stores with groceries and all sorts of other goods. Unfortunately, studies have shown that only 5-10% of these plastic bags are properly recycled nationwide.

What happens to the other 90-95% of discarded plastic bags? Most enter the solid waste system and end up slowly degrading in landfills over hundreds of years or contribute to toxic emissions at waste-to-energy facilities. Lightweight plastic bags get blown out of trashcans, garbage trucks or landfills and pollute our waterways. Plastic bags clog gutters and sewers, get caught in trees and end up in our rivers, lakes and oceans. Non-biodegradable bags pose a threat to avian and marine wildlife, entangling them or poisoning and choking them if the animal mistakes the bag for food.

The average plastic bag is used for about 12 minutes, but causes damage to the environment for over 1,000 years. Reducing the use of disposable shopping bags will ease the burden on our waste management system, cut down on pollution and help to protect our waterways and wildlife.

### WHAT IS THE DEBATE?

There are economic, environmental and practical benefits to replacing disposable plastic bags with reusable bags. Reusable shopping bags are more environmentally friendly than single-use plastic bags. Analysis conducted by California State University found reusable bags made from recycled polyethylene use 50% less energy, result in 40% lower emissions of climate pollution, and use 30% less water to produce than traditional, disposable plastic bags.

Reusable shopping bags will provide practical and economic benefits to Connecticut residents and waste management businesses. Reusable shopping bags can hold twice as many items as conventional plastic bags, do not burst under the weight of heavy items, are inexpensive and can be used many times. Improperly discarded plastic bags get stuck in the machinery that processes single stream recyclables, costing recycling facilities in repairs and the expense associated with those machines being off-line.

Retailers argue that removing plastic shopping bags from stores will harm consumers by adding an additional cost to their bill. Closer examination reveals that disposable bags are not, in fact, provided for free to customers. Stores pass the cost of plastic bags on to consumers in

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the price of the goods they sell. Analysis of the marketplace in California estimated that the average household paid \$17 annually in higher grocery prices to cover the cost of “free” bags.

Opponents of removing plastic bags claim that stores and consumers should be left to decide what types of bags to offer and use. Unfortunately, voluntary efforts aimed at simply reducing plastic bag consumption have not yielded the results necessary to prevent disposable bags’ impact on the environment and wildlife.

### WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

#### Phase-Out, and Ban, Single-Use Plastic Bags

Connecticut should phase-in a ban on single-use plastic bags. Incentives to choose reusable instead of plastic disposable shopping bags can be an intermediate step prior to ending use of such bags altogether. In 2010, Washington, D.C. introduced a small fee on plastic shopping bags used in stores and saw an 86% reduction in consumption after just a few months.

Connecticut could establish a similar fee for each disposable, plastic shopping bag.

#### Educate Consumers

Eliminating disposable shopping bags from retail stores will not solve the entire problem. Educational programs must be coupled with incentives so that consumers understand the fees and become more aware of their recycling habits in the rest of their daily activities. Connecticut should ensure that funding from the fees on disposable shopping bags support educational efforts by retail stores and industry groups.

In 2015, the General Assembly is considering legislation that will gradually phase out plastic bags from retail stores in Connecticut, beginning by first establishing a fee on single-use bags that will fund employee and customer education on the program.

For more information  
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