

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)
ABOUT THE PROPOSED PLASTIC BAG BAN**

Q. Why are you proposing a ban on plastic checkout bags?

A. Plastic checkout bags are not designed for reuse, generally tearing or puncturing after a first use. They are easily transported with the wind and are one of the most visible components of roadside and shoreline litter. They negatively impact both tourism and our own enjoyment of the natural beauty of the Island. They kill countless birds, fish, and marine mammals through ingestion and entanglement. Even when disposed of properly, they make up a significant component of solid waste in landfills and increase our waste disposal costs. In addition, plastic bags are produced from oil and natural gas, and never fully biodegrade, remaining in the environment as small or even microscopic particles, essentially forever.

Q. Which bags will be banned?

A. Plastic bags under 4.0 mils in thickness will no longer be provided to customers during checkout.

Q. Where did the 4.0 mils come from?

A. A bag 4.0 mils thick is sturdy enough to be reused many times without tearing.

Q. What about the plastic bags grocery stores provide for produce or deli meat, for example?

A. Plastic bags that are used before checkout for bulk foods, meats and produce, and similar items will still be provided in stores. The ban only deals with bags provided by a store to a customer during checkout.

Q. What about bags for small or easily damaged items?

A. Bags for carrying small items, such as beads or hardware items, are used before checkout. Like produce bags, they will not be affected by the ban. Paper bags would still be allowed, and could be used to carry small items and things that could be damaged if they were in a larger bag with other items.

Q. What about bags used to protect newspapers?

A. The ban only covers carryout bags provided at checkout, so newspaper delivery bags are not covered.

Q. What about plastic bags that are “biodegradable” or “compostable”?

A. They will not be allowed if they are less than 4.0 mils thick. Bags marketed as ‘biodegradable’ or ‘compostable’ are not a good alternative to regular plastic bags because the science on these plastic bags is not settled. It’s unclear whether they degrade quickly enough to ensure they don’t harm animals or the environment. So, allowing their use at this time does not ensure that we would meet our goal to reduce the many impacts of plastic bags. These bags are also unlikely to be an attractive option to retailers because at this time they are more expensive than regular plastic or paper bags.

Q. Can stores still sell trash bags, Ziplock bags, pet waste bags and the like?

A. You will still be able to purchase packages of multiple plastic bags such as sandwich bags, Ziploc bags, and trash bags. The ban only deals with bags provided by a store to a customer during checkout.

Q. I reuse my plastic checkout bags to line wastebaskets. I know people use them to collect dog waste. Now what am I supposed to do for those miscellaneous uses?

A. You can reuse produce bags, newspaper bags, bread bags and the like which are not covered by the ban. Paper bags can be substituted for many miscellaneous purposes. If you really do need plastic, you will still be able to purchase packages of multiple plastic bags, like sandwich bags or trash bags.

Q. When I go to a store and they're not allowed to provide me with a plastic checkout bag, what are my options?

A. Stores can still provide paper bags and plastic bags that are 4.0 mils or thicker. However, a major objective of this bylaw is to get away from single-use bags altogether. Try to bring your own reusable bags when you shop, or a backpack or box or even your own old 'recycled' plastic checkout bags if they are up to it. Here are some tips for remembering your reusable bags:

- Try keeping your reusable bags in your car, or at work.
- After you put your groceries away, hang your reusable bags by the door.
- Keep them by your keys so you remember to take them back out to the car with you.
- Finally, if you forget and leave your bags in the car while shopping, just put your groceries back in the cart and bag them at your car!

Q. Will stores be charging a fee for permitted checkout bags?

A. This bylaw does not require or prohibit a fee – stores may charge a fee if they choose. Or they may choose to provide a credit to customers who bring their own bags. One of the objectives of the ban is to encourage people to bring their own reusable bags when they shop.

Q. Are any stores exempt?

A. The ban targets bags, not stores, so no stores would be exempt. All stores would have to stop providing plastic checkout bags under 4.0mils.

Q. Aren't checkout plastic bags supposed to be recyclable?

A. Our local recyclers (Bruno's and the MV Regional Refuse District) don't accept plastic bags. Nationally, about 3% of plastic checkout bags are returned to grocery stores, though it is unclear how much of that material is actually recycled. In general, plastic bags don't suit the recycling model because it's not financially viable, with the resulting product being worth far less than the cost of production. Worse, plastic bags are a menace in the recycling process. They get stuck in the sorting machines, gumming up the works so that the process comes to a halt as often as several times a day to be manually cleared, resulting in increased costs of recycling and trash removal for local communities.

Q. What's the link between animal health and plastic litter?

A. Littered plastic is a huge problem for the health of wildlife, as many animals ingest it thinking it is food, which can cause breathing and digestive problems. Tens of thousands of whales, birds, seals and turtles are killed every year due to ocean-borne plastic bags. The

Worldwatch Institute reports that at least 267 species of marine wildlife are known to have suffered from entanglement or ingestion of marine debris, most of which is plastic. A recent European Commission study on the impact of litter on North Sea wildlife found that 90 percent of the birds examined had plastic in their stomachs.

Q. What is the link between human health and plastic litter?

- A. Plastics never really biodegrade, but instead eventually break down in sunlight (photodegrade) into microscopic particles. When on land, these “microplastics” enter our soil and drinking water, but most will reach the ocean one way or another. Microplastics are readily eaten by small fish and zooplankton, and then make their way up the food chain – or to our dinner plate.

The impact of consuming these microplastics on human health is currently unclear. Microplastics readily adsorb some toxins, and many plastics are made of toxic materials to begin with. Studies do not currently establish definitively that there is a causal relationship between microplastics and human disease, but the existence of huge amounts of plastic in the ocean, and its accumulation in the bodies of the species we eat, is indisputable. Bag bans are an effort to reverse this trend.

Q. How do reusable bags compare to plastic bags in terms of their impact on the environment?

- A. The question as to whether something is good for the environment touches on many issues: climate change, resource conservation, animal welfare, ecosystem functioning, human health, litter, recycling and waste management. In the case of shopping bags, some of these “goods” are in opposition to each other. So, while reusable bags do require more natural resources to manufacture than disposable bags, on average, once a reusable bag has been used 4 times it has “done its job” – at that point, you and your bag will have done a net good for the environment. But reusable bags are used way more than 4 times – so the net good keeps getting better!

Q. Are paper bags better or worse for the environment than plastic ones?

- A. Paper, unlike plastic, is made from renewable resources, and it is “real world” recyclable – being regularly recycled here and in many communities. In addition, paper bags don't have the marine and land litter consequences and impacts on wildlife that plastic bags do. And paper doesn't remain in the environment for 1000 years.

Q. Has a bag ban been enacted elsewhere?

- A. There are hundreds of communities in the US that have already passed ordinances banning plastic bags. Just last year Falmouth became the eleventh town in Massachusetts to pass a plastic bag ban, and many more, including Truro and Chatham, are working on it. Entire countries have adopted plastic bag bans – like China, Brazil, Italy, India and at least 7 African nations. We are hardly revolutionary on this one -- Nantucket did it 25 years ago.

Q. Do bag bans really work?

- A. Yes, communities that have enacted bans have seen an increase in the numbers of shoppers who bring their own bags, and a decrease in the amount of plastic bag litter on roadsides and in water bodies and storm drains. In San Jose, the plastic bag ordinance resulted in an

89% reduction of plastic bag litter in storm drains, a 60% reduction in creeks and a 59% reduction in city streets.

Q. How will the bylaw be enforced if it is passed?

A. Enforcement of the ban will be complaint driven. The Board of Health Agent or a police officer can investigate any complaints.

Q. Will every Town's bylaw be the same?

A. We hope that every Island Town will pass the same bylaw. It will make it easier for stores who operate in more than one town and for consumers to understand the rules and change their habits.

Q. What if not all Island Towns enact the ban??

A. The ban will take effect in the towns that pass it.

Q. If the bylaw is passed, when will it take effect?

A. The current plan is that it will take effect on January 1st, 2017. This will give stores the whole summer to use up any existing stock of plastic bags.

Q. How can I get more information?

A. Call or email Samantha Look at Vineyard Conservation Society.
508-693-9588/slook@vineyardconservation.org

The plastic grocery bag was first introduced in stores in the early 1970s. We survived without them before and, for the sake of both our environment and our economy, we can do so again.

