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## **Guilford Officials Approve Plastic Bag Ban Ordinance**

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Single-use plastic bags will soon be a thing of the past in Guilford. Following a well-attended public hearing on an ordinance to ban single-use plastic bags at the point of checkout in Guilford on May 28, the Board of Selectmen (BOS) unanimously voted on June 3 to approve the ordinance. The ban will now go into affect Jan. 1, 2020.

More than 100 residents attended the public hearing on the ordinance, armed with signs and facts, ready to support the ordinance.

The action listed for the public hearing was whether or not the town should “amend the Code of the Town of Guilford Chapter 236 Solid Waste and Recycling to include restrictions of store use single-use plastic bags.”

The ordinance, as proposed, would eliminate all single-use plastic bags at the point of checkout. The ordinance would allow businesses to phase out plastic bags over a six-month period, allowing owners to work through plastic bags they may have already purchased. In addition, a 10-cent fee would be placed on paper bags to encourage people to switch to reusable bags and not just flip from plastic to paper.

Discussions surrounding plastic waste and a potential ban have been ongoing over the last several months in town. The Sustainable Guilford Task Force held a public information session in March to discuss work done to date by the task force and the proposed single-use plastic bag ban ordinance. At the public hearing on May 28, Task force co-chair Terri Cain said this community needs to step up and do its part to protect the environment.

“We are on a mission here to clean up and preserve a beautiful spot, our own beautiful historical town of Guilford, and we are situated on something that definitely deserves our respect and care and that is Long Island Sound,” she said.

To date, Cain said 13 towns in Connecticut have now passed similar bans and nearly 20 towns are in the same position as Guilford, working towards adopting a local ban. Cain said she likes the way the Guilford ban is written because it bans plastic and puts a fee on paper. She said this is important because the goal of the ban isn’t to get people to switch from plastic to paper, because paper also has a carbon footprint. Its about reducing single-use waste overall.

### **Changing Habits**

“The fee makes sense because it costs money to produce paper bags and that fee will go back to the merchants so they can cover their costs for purchasing paper” bags, she said. “The end game, though, is we hope people won’t use paper bags. Once you get use to it, bringing your own bag is an easy habit.”

First Selectman Matt Hoey echoed Cain’s point about changing habits and said it is something everyone—including him—needs to think about.

“I believe I have had reusable in the trunk of my car for 10 or 15 years, and I call them grocery bags, right?” he said. “It took me until this issue came up about a year ago to start to think that it’s not just for groceries. When I go to Walmart and I can walk out with four or five plastic bags there while those grocery bags are sitting in my car, so I, too, am one of those people that needs to re-educate myself about the completeness of utilizing the reusable bags.”

Numerous residents at the public hearing asked about other single-use plastic bags found within a grocery store, like the bags one might use for fruit or vegetables. Hoey said this ban does not apply to those bags at this time.

“The world doesn’t change overnight,” he said. “This is step one. Imagine the disruption if we had to get rid of every single plastic bag in every store. I am assuming this movement will get there eventually with the vegetable bags and fruit bags. This is a first step and this is one of the easy ways to start to make a difference.”

### **Hartford’s Slow Progress**

The issue of the state was also raised at the hearing. Three states in the country have issued state-wide bans to date and some residents were curious why a state as small as Connecticut couldn’t manage to do the same.

Hoey said, based on conversations with State Senator Christine Cohen (D-12) who co-chairs the Senate Environment Committee, the state had hoped it do so this year, but that attempt is faltering.

“The state, by [Cohen’s] own admission, can’t get out of their own way on this issue,” he said. “The bill has morphed from what was an outright plastic bag ban to something proposed to be a two-year phase out with a 10-cent charge on plastic bags as well as a charge on the paper bag. The Appropriations Committee had decided that they needed some revenue and that fee is going to go to the state under the current bill.”

However, Hoey said the bill currently up for consideration by the state legislature is not all bad news.

“The good news in that bill, unlike most state statutes, [is] there will not be a preemption clause, which means that municipalities are allowed to enact measures that go farther than the state ban,” he said. “It’s a rarity that state statutes are written without forcing preemption.”

With the Guilford ban not going into effect until Jan. 1, 2020, one resident asked if the Board of Selectmen (BOS) would consider offering incentives for businesses that choose to embrace the ban earlier than required.

“We haven’t discussed a monetary incentive and I don’t believe we will,” said Hoey. “However, the first to market is often the one who wins and in a competitive marketplace, those who adopt it first may find favor from the community for having adopted this ban sooner than the required date of Jan. 1.”

Many members of the community hoped to see the BOS vote on the ordinance after the public hearing on May 28, but because not all selectmen were able to attend that evening, Hoey said the board would vote in the coming weeks. That answer drew some groans from the audience, but Hoey said giving all elected officials a change to vote on important issues such as this is a priority for the whole board.

“It’s important,” he said. “Every vote that this board has taken since it came together about 17 months ago has been a 5-0 on every big issue that has come before us. It is imperative that we all voice our opinions because that’s what makes, at this point in my eyes, this board so effective. The vote will happen within the next month.”

Selectmen also pointed out that formally voting on the ordinance in June would not change the implementation date of Jan. 1, 2020.

### **The BOS Meeting**

On June 3, the BOS was still short one member—this time, Hoey—but opted to move ahead with a vote, knowing that Hoey supports the ordinance. Selectmen also took the time to address some of the concerns raised at the public hearing. Selectman Sue Renner said the only person who spoke in opposition wasn’t opposed to eliminating plastic bags, but didn’t want to see a law put in place.

“I was at that same place when we first started talking about this—why should it be a law?” she said. “We all know what we need to do, so why can’t we all just get our act together? I made it my mission to try to do that myself and I failed. I mean I was better...but as First Selectman Matt Hoey pointed out, it is easy to remember your big bags when you go on that weekly grocery trip, but then you go into CVS to buy toothpaste, meaning to say ‘No bag’ and then you get looking at the candy bars and the next thing you know you are walking out with a plastic bag. I think this absolutely needs to be done.”

Selectman Lou Federici said he has seen some discussion around how people reuse single-use plastic bags for things like lining a trash bin or picking up after a dog. He said he understands that, but noted that there are more environmentally friendly alternatives for those uses and asked the sustainable task force to share some of those items and ideas with the public.

“I am aware of the objections, but I think there are reasonable solutions to all of them,” he said. “The slight change in behavior that will be necessitated by this is worth it in my opinion.”