

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q1: WHY DO WE NEED A PLASTIC SHOPPING BAG ORDINANCE?

A: Single-use, disposable plastic shopping bags are a major source of litter and pollution in our environment. Here are some basic facts:

- Worldwide, more than one TRILLION plastic bags are used annually.
- At 500 plastic shopping bags /adult /year, **Darien uses an estimated 6.5 million** plastic bags/year (Appendix A).
- Less than 12%¹ are recycled in the US. The rest end up in the ocean, waterways and throughout the land.
- The Darien waste management facility throws the bags in with the rest of the waste material that is sent to the incinerator in Bridgeport. Ash from incinerators is sent to landfills. Over the years this mixes with water and forms sludge that may leak into the water table or water ways.
- Plastic bags do not biodegrade. Light breaks them down into smaller and smaller particles that contaminate the soil and water and are expensive and difficult to remove.
- When the small particles from photo-degraded plastic bags spread in the water, they are ingested by marine animals. Bio toxins like PCBs that are in the particles are then passed up the food chain, all the way up to humans¹.
- More than 100,000 marine animals & birds die each year from plastic related debris.
- The City of San Francisco determined that it costs 17 cents for them to handle each discarded bag¹ (compared to the cost of a plastic bag which is only 5 cents. **In other words, it costs more to dispose than to buy!**).

Q2: DO WE HAVE A PLASTIC BAG PROBLEM IN DARIEN?

Yes, we have a problem here in Darien. We have taken many photographs of bags in our town which will be on display at the RTM meeting on January 23rd. Many Darien citizens have reported that they notice bags as they go around town. Being close to the shores of Long Island Sound, these bags end up in the waters of the Sound via Darien streams and beaches.

¹ Bushnell, K. *Plastic Bags: What About Recycling Them?* The Sierra Club. Retrieved June 2010 from http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption/articles/bags2.asp

Under Policies, Chapter 3, Environmental Resources, the **Town plan of Conservation and Development** states the following policy:

"To preserve and enhance public use and enjoyment of the Town's coastal resources as well as to ensure current and future ecological integrity of those resources....

Resources included are aquifers; watercourses and watersheds; wetlands; floodplains; coastal resources and air quality."

CTR made a presentation to the **Darien Environmental Protection Commission** last year. The commission voted **unanimously** in support of the ban and followed it with a letter to the Board of Selectman. This letter is available for you to view [here](#).

Q3: WON'T THE PROPOSED ORDINANCE HURT BUSINESS OWNERS AS PAPER BAGS, ON AVERAGE COST MORE THAN PLASTIC?

A: The proposed ordinance is not intended to promote a switch to paper shopping bags but is part of a larger educational campaign to encourage the use of **reusable** bags, thereby contributing to a cleaner, healthier environment.

Although they are less expensive than paper bags, bags in general represent an insignificant portion of retailer operating expenses. Westport businesses have not reported any significant increase in costs due to the elimination of plastic bags as a result of the 2008 Westport ordinance. This is primarily due to the fact that a culture of reusable bags has taken hold in Westport as a consequence of the ban.

The proposed ordinance is part of a larger campaign to reduce single-use bags. The use of paper bags will also decline as shoppers adopt reusable bags, allowing businesses to purchase less disposable bags and promote the sale of reusable bags.

Studies conducted by Choose to Reuse (CTR) in Southampton, NY where the ban was implemented three months ago, in Westport, CT where the ban has been in place for 2 years, and others, reveal that merchants were not unduly affected by the ban. The following common threads:

- **No merchant said that they have suffered financially** as a result of the ordinance, and none was aware of any other merchants who have suffered. The increased **cost of the paper bag was offset** somewhat by the sale of reusable bags and the remainder absorbed into overhead costs. One grocer said "I'm saving money by not having to buy bags, people bring in their own bags".
- All merchants we interviewed have noticed an **increase in reusable bag use**.
- Many noticed a **reduced usage of paper bags** because more and more people bring in their own reusable bags. The Stop and Shop manager from Westport said ""we cut down usage of paper bags by 50%".
- **No loss of customers** due to the ban. Anthony from 'Stiles' in Westport, an independent grocer said, "You must feel confident that your customers come to you because of what you offer, not for plastic bags". Westport Trader Joe's supervisor

stated that although their store borders other towns, they have not seen any drop in business since the law was passed 3 years ago.

- This was a **good strategy for their business** image. John Moretti of Natural Foods said, "Didn't want the bad press of not supporting our environment. It's the right thing to do."
- All merchants said that there were **no significant obstacles when transitioning** to from plastic. As one deli owner in Southampton put it, "it may be an inconvenience in the beginning as we make changes, but we'll all adjust. In the future, no one will even know what a t-shirt bag is".
- Any food that could spill/leak is contained in paper or plastic. Some merchants choose to put the containers in paper bags or thin film plastic bags. They reported no change from how they previously enclosed such food items.

Please review additional merchant comments [here](#).

Q4: AREN'T PAPER BAGS MORE COSTLY AND WORSE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT THAN PLASTIC BAGS?

You are assuming that for every plastic bag that is not used, a paper bag will be substituted. The experience of communities that have implemented the plastic bag ban shows that it not only eliminates plastic bags but reduces the use of paper bags. So whether the cost to the environment of paper bags is lower or higher than plastic bags, the fact that there is less consumption means the overall cost has been reduced.

The second point is that even if you make a bag by bag comparison between paper and plastic, while it is true that paper has a higher cost and carbon foot print from the point that it is manufactured, transported from the factory to the point it is used, when you take into account the full life cycle of plastic bags, it would take into account not only the cost of producing the bags, but also the cost in the disposal of these bags. [82% of all paper bags are recycled](#) while 12% of plastic bags are recycled. If paper ends up in the sea or somewhere on land, it bio-degrades completely, 100%. If plastic goes into the sea or gets buried, it remains forever. In the sea plastic photo degrades into small particles and gets consumed by marine life and from there it gets into our food system.

Bag cleanup costs are not factored into the equation. We've seen videos of state-of-the-art single-stream recycling where plastic bags have to be removed manually and fed into overhead suction devices as the conveyor belt carries waste that is going through a separation process. There is a huge cost associated with this manual effort. San Francisco [estimated](#) that it costs them on average 17c per bag to clean up their watersheds.

The ban is good not only for elimination of plastic bags but also for the elimination of paper bags.

Q5: WHY WON'T A VOLUNTARY BAN WORK IN DARIEN?

A: In April, 2011, CTR followed up on a suggestion by the Darien Board of Selectmen to pursue a voluntary ban plastic shopping bag ban in Darien. We canvassed 150 merchants in Darien, focusing on retail stores, to assess their commitment to a voluntary ban of single use

plastic shopping bags. Of these 150 merchants, about 35 could not commit to voluntarily giving up the use of the plastic bags in question.

Of the larger stores like Stop&Shop and CVS, the managers were unable to make this commitment because of their corporate policy. These big-box stores would observe a town ordinance, but they would not eliminate plastic bags voluntarily. Since the two Stop&Shop stores alone account for 50% of the plastic bags given out in Darien (see Appendix A), **a voluntary ban cannot work unless they, Stop&Shop, are compliant.** To see the complete results of this survey please click [here](#).

The town of Wilton implemented a 'Go Green Campaign', an educational effort to voluntarily limit the use of plastic shopping bags. The leaders of the Wilton Go Green Campaign have performed a before and after survey to determine the number of shoppers that have changed their behavior. They have been disappointed with the results of their educational efforts which included giving away 12,000 reusable bags along with an aggressive PR program, and finding that reusable bag usage only went up by some 12 percent. The group is now interested in pursuing an ordinance to ban plastic shopping bags.

Q6: WE NEED TO SUPPORT OUR LOCAL MERCHANTS BECAUSE THE COMMERCIAL TAXES THEY CONTRIBUTE TO DARIEN'S BOTTOM LINE ARE IMPORTANT, RIGHT?

A: While every tax dollar is important, Darien only receives 8% of its tax revenues from commercial properties (e.g. local merchants and country clubs). 92% of Darien's tax revenues come from resident tax payers like you and me. (Overall the town's property is assessed at \$8.3 billion of which \$711 million is commercial property.) Darien is known for its low commercial tax base. So while we need to support our local merchants, the taxes they contribute are not the driving reason why.

Q7: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF PLASTIC BAGS IS ACTUALLY RECYCLED?

A. According to the EPA 12% of plastic bags are recycled. The rest are incinerated, end up in landfills, or in our waterways. **In Darien, no plastic bags are recycled from the Darien dump.** They are thrown in with the rest of the waste in the Big Hole and all carted away to the incinerator in Bridgeport.

The plastic bags that are collected at the **recycling bins near grocery stores represent a tiny portion of the 6 million plastic bags consumed in Darien each year.** It appears these eventually are baled and shipped to China and India and it is difficult to trace what happens to them there.

Q8: WHAT HAPPENS TO PLASTIC BAGS SENT TO THE DARIEN REFUSE DISPOSAL AREA & RECYCLING CENTER?

Darien bags that are taken to the Darien Dump are thrown in with the regular trash and sent to the incinerator in Bridgeport. Since 12% of bags are recycled, 88% end up either in the water, or are sent to the incinerator.

Plastic bags are harmful when incinerated because they release fine particles that are harmful when inhaled. Ash remaining at the end of incineration is put into landfills. Ash in the landfills becomes sludge when it mixes with rainwater, and this either ends up in the ground water or is washed into our rivers and streams into the oceans.

Q9: IS IT TRUE THAT ALL PLASTIC BAGS ARE RECYCLABLE IN YOUR MIXED RECYCLABLES ?

There is some mis-information in this town that plastic bags can be gathered up, added to the bottles and plastics, and then sorted and recycled by City Carting.

This statement has a serious problem. Members of CTR visited City Carting in Stamford a few weeks ago and met with three managers there. These managers all told us that plastic bags are a serious problem for single stream recycling for 2 reasons:

1. While being sorted, these bags frequently get caught in the sorting machines and have to be manually pulled out of the material stream. There is substantial labor cost associated with this
2. They have to be baled into 1 ton bales of 170,000 bags. That takes up a lot of space and adds a huge overhead to the processing of recyclables

Furthermore, the market for these bags is sketchy. These bales are typically sent to countries like India and China. Everyone in the room told CTR that they supported our efforts to put an end to these bags.

Q10: IS THE PROBLEM REALLY THAT BAD, THAT WE NEED TO PASS NEW LEGISLATION?

A: Yes. The lasting damage from a disposable plastic bag that is used – on average - for only 12 minutes before being discarded is huge. Plastic does not biodegrade, it accumulates in the environment. The more we produce, consume, and recycle plastics, the more plastic will come into the world and accumulate in landfills, on land, in rivers, and the sea. **Plastics that degrade at sea, concentrate incredibly dangerous chemicals. Fish eat this plastic² thinking it is food, and we eat the fish. This legislation will demonstrate that Darien understands** the need to protect ourselves by moving away from our “disposable” habit to a “reusable” one.

Q11: WHY ISN'T AN EDUCATION CAMPAIGN ENOUGH TO GET THE POINT ACROSS?

A: CTR has conducted an education and promotion campaign about the benefits of reusable bags in over 30 forums and town meetings including, LWV, BOS, Boy Scouts, Rotary, Kiwanis, the Depot, and PTO's, to name a few. We have collected over 800 signatures of residents who support our proposed ordinance and received dozens of letters of support from the community and civic leaders. We have held information sessions at library, letters

² Scripps Institution of Oceanography
<http://scrippsnews.ucsd.edu/Releases/?releaseID=1174>

to editor, bag contest for reusable bags, Nature Center exhibit etc. (to see a complete list go to Appendix B - Awareness and Education Efforts). The fact is that we have not seen significant change. People haven't changed their habits and that's why when you leave grocery stores you still see carts full of plastic

Sometimes education is not enough to change habits that are considered part of everyday life, but are actually of little value to the community, and can be harmful to many. As members of a community, we accept regulations imposed on us every day: we're not allowed to litter; we must recycle; we are required to pick up after our dogs; we must use a seatbelt. This ordinance is similar to these forms of legislation where voluntary compliance has not achieved the desired results because of reluctance of individuals to change their behavior.

Retail establishments impose rules too, that we, as shoppers, accept: Costco, for example, has imposed its own "regulation" by not offering bags to customers. It's good business because it cuts costs.

Q12: IS THIS A NEW CONCEPT? HOW ARE PLASTIC BAGS AFFECTING OTHER TOWNS?

A: No. Many communities have understood the need to solve their litter and pollution problems by passing similar ordinances. In our neighborhood Rye, NY, Westport, CT, and Southampton Village, NY are three municipalities that have passed ordinances. There are hundreds of towns, cities and countries around the world that have similar ordinances. The international crisis, which plastic bags are creating, is indicated by the fact that most nations recognize the problem and are making strong attempts to eliminate the use and productions of plastic bags.

Many countries in Europe and Asia are attempting to eradicate plastic bags. Some are banning plastic bags altogether while others are implementing a tax on plastic bags to decrease their use. In Bangladesh, plastic bags have been banned completely since early 2002. They were found to have been the main culprit during the 1988 and 1998 floods that submerged two-thirds of the country. The problem was that discarded bags were choking the drainage system. Click [here](#) to read more. In Ireland, a tax on plastic bags was introduced. Essentially, each plastic bag handed out costs the consumer an extra 15 cents. After the tax scheme began in March 2002, it is estimated the plastic bags dispensed at stores have been decreased by 90%.

Click [here](#) to see a complete list of [towns](#) in the US and [cities and countries](#) around the world that have banned single use plastic shopping bags. Many [towns](#) in the US are right now in the process of eliminating plastic shopping bags.

Q13: WHAT WAS THE MARGIN BY WHICH THE BAN WAS APPROVED IN THE WESTPORT RTM AND THE TOWN OF RYE CITY COUNCIL?

The ordinance in Westport passed the RTM 25-5-1, with widespread support from Republicans and Democrats. The ordinance was also supported by the Westport Chamber of Commerce as well as the Downtown Merchants' Association. Click [here](#) to read more.

Rye's City Council in an overwhelming 7-0 vote approved an ordinance banning plastic shopping bags from the City of Rye, NY.

Q14: WHY NOT USE "BIODEGRADABLE" PLASTIC BAGS?

A: There are many issues surrounding "biodegradable" bags. "Certified" biodegradable plastics require months of elevated heat, moisture and oxygen to biodegrade. These conditions are only found in expensive, professionally managed composting facilities. Studies have shown that these types of bags do not effectively disintegrate back into nature³. A far more important point is that these bags are disposable and thus, counter to the objective of reducing the amount of waste and pollution in our environment.

Q15: WON'T THE PROPOSED ORDINANCE HURT CONSUMERS?

A: There will be a minimal cost associated with purchasing a few, inexpensive reusable bags. It is unlikely that retail prices will be noticeably affected by the elimination of plastic bags.

Q16: CAN REUSABLE GROCERY BAGS BE CONTAMINATED?

A: The American Chemistry Council funded and publicized study done by the University of Arizona that indicated harmful bacterial contamination in reusable bags. This finding was debunked by *Consumer Reports* which studied the issue. The food-safety experts at *Consumer Reports* stated the bacteria found is NOT E. coli but rather bacteria that normally don't cause disease. A senior staff scientist at *Consumer Reports*, said, "A person eating an average bag of salad greens gets more exposure to these (harmful) bacteria than if they had licked the insides of the dirtiest bag from this study"⁴. *Consumer Reports* advises shoppers to carry meat, fish, or poultry in disposable bags and use reusable bags for everything else; and to occasionally wash the reusable bags.

To read more about the findings of Consumer Reports click [here](#).

Q17: WHAT WILL I USE IF I NEED TO LINE MY TRASH BIN OR PICK UP DOG WASTE?

A: Garbage bags, newspaper bags will still be available.

³ "Facing the Dirty Truth About Recyclable Plastics"
<http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2400>

⁴ Can reusable grocery bags make you sick, or is that just baloney?

<http://news.consumerreports.org/safety/2010/07/can-reusable-grocery-bags-make-you-sick-or-is-that-just-baloney.html>

APPENDIX A – PLASTIC BAG USAGE

Darien Adults (over 18) = 13,351⁵

According to American Plastics Manufacturing, the average number of bags used by an adult in the US = 500 / year

Total bags estimated to be used in Darien by the adult population more than **6.5 Million** / year

Stop&Shop at Noroton and Goodwives together use 28 boxes of plastic bags per week

Each box contains 2,000 bags.

Number of bags used in one week by two S&S store – $28 \times 2,000 = 56,000$

Number of bags used in a year = $56,000 \times 52 = 2,912,000$

Two Stop and Shop stores give out close to 3 million plastic shopping bags per year.

⁵ <http://darien.patch.com/articles/census-2010-dariens-population-hits-20732>

APPENDIX B - AWARENESS AND EDUCATION EFFORTS IN SUPPORT OF REUSABLE BAGS

- Over 800 signatures on the Petition
- 3 Screenings of the film 'BAG IT!'
- In The Bag - art exhibition at Nature Center
- Presentations to
 - the Environmental Protection Commission - voted unanimously to support the ordinance
 - Seniors
 - The Green Team
 - League of Women Voters
 - Boy Scouts
- Town wide design-a-logo and reusable bag contest
- Green Drinks event
- Information table at 'Down on the Farm' event
- Earth Day at the Darien High School
- Memorial Day Parade
- Information table at the Post 53 Food Fair at Tilly Pond
- Conversations with Darien merchants to discuss the voluntary ban
- PTO Presentations
- Reusable bag giveaways in front of Stop&Shop and Palmers