

# Plastic bag bans and fees catching on in Maine

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By Mary Pols

In the six months since Portland passed an ordinance calling for most food retailers to charge a nickel for each single-use plastic or paper bag, reusable bags have gotten extremely popular. Before the ordinance went into effect on April 15, about 10 percent of Hannaford customers came in with reusable bags. Now more than 80 percent do.

“We’ve also seen a very substantial increase in people purchasing reusable bags, about 350 percent in Portland,” Hannaford spokesman Eric Blom said. The supermarket won’t reveal the exact number of bags it’s selling or charging a fee for, on the grounds that is proprietary information. But the 350 percent increase in sales comes on top of the 160,000 reusable bags the grocery chain gave away in the weeks right before Portland’s ordinance went into effect.

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## SHOPPING BAGS, FROM WORST TO BEST



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Reusable is in. “It’s the norm now,” Blom said.

And what’s popular in Portland is catching on elsewhere in southern and midcoast Maine. South Portland has already passed a similar bag ordinance, which goes into effect in March, and five other communities are either considering or about to vote on similar ordinances.

“It’s exciting,” said Kimberly Darling, energy and sustainability coordinator for Falmouth, which has been studying the issue for the past year and is likely to institute a fee within the month on single-use bags. “It seems like a lot of communities were just waiting to see how it went in Portland.”

Meanwhile York is poised to be the first community in the state to pass an outright ban on plastic bags; voters will consider Article No. 7 on their Nov. 3 ballot. If all five – Brunswick, Falmouth, Freeport, Topsham and York – move forward with proposed or potential measures, by next year nearly 12 percent of Maine’s 1.3 million residents will say goodbye to most plastic bags, with the exception of places like the dry cleaner, the hardware store or the seafood counter.

## **GOOD RIDDANCE?**

Estimates are that every human being in American uses 360 plastic bags a year. Even the babies, via their madly shopping parents. That’s almost 479 million bags used annually in Maine alone. All made from petroleum, a non-renewable resource. Proponents of plastic bag fees and bans argue, sensibly, that if you don’t need to use petroleum to make bags, why would you? They’re cheap, but at what cost?

America’s relationship with the oh-so-convenient plastic bag sack started with baggies in the 1950s. Plastic produce bags were introduced in 1969, and plastic grocery bags arrived in American supermarkets in 1977. To say they were a hit is a major understatement. How light and what about the handles! Who didn’t prefer handles?

Victoria Simon didn’t, at least not these particular handles. Simon, the leader of the citizen’s group leading the charge against plastic bags in York, remembers having immediate reservations. “Just looking at them it just seemed so obvious to me,” she said. “Where are all these bags going? Where are they ending up?”

The simple answer is, they’re ending up in landfills, roadsides and eventually rivers, streams and the ocean. They don’t biodegrade, but they do break down into smaller pieces and increasingly, studies have found plastics in everything from mammals to mussels. And therefore, in us.

“Not only do these bags leach the chemicals that were made to create them, but they accumulate toxins in the water,” said Melissa Gates, the point person on Northeast campaigns for the environmental advocacy group the Surfrider Foundation. “Let’s say a duck swims through and swallows a piece of bag that she thinks is plankton. It has acted as a sponge for all these other toxins. Then you shoot the duck and eat the duck, and the plastics and toxins end up in you.”

“The reality is that every piece of plastic that has ever been manufactured is still here,” Gates added.

Rise Above Plastics is one of Surfrider’s most visible campaigns, and the group advocated for the Portland ordinance. Now she’s working with Simon to help get York’s ordinance approved by voters in November.

Simon spent the 1980s raising children and the '90s trying to nudge local store managers to put up signs reminding customers to bring in their own bags. In 2013 she founded Bring Your Own Bag York. The group ([byobyork.org](http://byobyork.org)) focused on education its first year and then began advocating for a plastic bag ordinance, using as its model the one Portland passed in June 2014. Like the Portland ordinance, the York regulation would not go into effect immediately, to give retailers time to prepare.

## **STATEWIDE**

Simon was also inspired by the efforts of her friend Paul McGowan, a state representative elected in 2012. He’d introduced a statewide bill to minimize the use of plastic bags in 2013 after returning from a vacation in Hawaii, where several of the islands had already banned plastic bags. “He said, ‘We could do this in Maine,’” Simon said. “And he introduced a bill.” She traveled to Augusta to testify, but “it didn’t even get out of committee.”

McGowan died in July 2014.



Victoria Simon, center, and her husband, Michael Modern, check out at the Golden Harvest in Kittery, assisted by cashier Ashley Kehrig. *Jill Brady/Staff Photograph*

“It was inspiring to me that he had cared enough to try,” Simon said. Since his death, three other statewide bills on plastic bags have also failed. Maine might have been hip to the whole concept of the Bottle Bill, enacting it in 1976, but it hasn’t been a leader on plastic bags.

This year, Hawaii became the first state to implement a ban on single-use plastic bags, although proponents were outraged when retailers started distributing “reusable” plastic bags, incrementally thicker but reusable only in the most fleeting sense of the word. As Gates put it, “The best plastic bag is no plastic bag.”

California passed a law in 2014, but it hasn’t gone into effect and now faces a referendum after intense opposition by industry groups. But more than 150 communities and cities nationwide, including Washington, D.C., and San Jose in California, have taken action to reduce or eliminate plastic bags.

Proponents like Sierra Club Maine’s Director Glen Brand point to nearly immediate impacts on the environment in other communities. In San Jose, litter surveys conducted a year after a tough ordinance (fees for bags started at 10 cents and increased to 25 cents later) showed an 89 percent decrease of bag litter in storm drain systems, 60 percent in creeks and rivers and 59 percent in city streets and neighborhoods. Reusable bag use increased from about 4 percent to 62 percent and the number of people who chose to carry items by hand doubled.

By law, part of the fee charged by retailers for bags in D.C. goes to the Anacostia River Clean Up and Protection Fund; so far, fees have raised \$10 million. But this spring, a Washington Post investigation of that fund found that a large portion of it has gone into administrative costs and salaries for pre-existing jobs as well as field trips for fifth-graders to campsites 30 miles from the river; only one-third of the \$6.8 million already spent has been used for river cleanup, the Post investigation found.

This is just the kind of information that fuels opponents to bag fees and bans. Freeport, which is deciding now whether to pass an ordinance or first see what the voters think of it, has already heard from the American Progressive Bag Alliance, a plastics trade group, both by letter and speaker phone at a recent ordinance committee meeting. Councilman Bill Rixon, who supports a bag fee, is worried about becoming a test case for industry lobbying. Freeport has a history of standing up for itself environmentally, banning polystyrene containers 25 years ago, and a survey found that 80 percent of its merchants already use paper rather than plastic bags (paper bags, however, have their own set of issues). “I’m afraid that the plastic industry would come in and misrepresent things. It would really be a feather in their caps if they can say, ‘Look, Freeport, the town that said no to Styrofoam, is OK with plastic bags,’” Rixon said.

Unfortunately for fee and ban advocates, it’s too early to quantify how much Portland’s ordinance has done to clean up the environment. The news on how many people seem to be adapting to reusable bags is encouraging, but while it should follow that fewer bags are floating around Portland’s waters, or clogging up landfills, or EcoMaine’s sorting equipment (a chronic problem), no one knows for sure yet. For now, it’s supposition.

As the Portland ordinance was going up for the vote in 2014, the Natural Resources Council of Maine and Surfrider Foundation partnered to do a litter cleanup in Back Cove, during which they counted plastic bags and found they made up the bulk of the trash. Sarah Lakeman of the Natural Resources Council said they’ll likely visit again on the anniversary of the enactment to see if the composition of the litter has changed as a result of the bag fee.

## PAPER OR PLASTIC?

While Portland established a model for bag ordinances, the proposals under consideration [in the five additional communities](#) are not necessarily exact copies (see sidebar). In York, for instance, Simon encountered opposition from the board of selectmen over fees for bags. As a result, York’s Measure 7 – ordinances need voter approval in York – would ban plastic bags but not include a mandatory uniform fee for paper bags. Gates of Surfrider can live with that, but says it is far from ideal for two reasons.

“If people have to pay for brown paper bags, they are more likely to bring recyclable bags,” she said. “And if you don’t set a mandatory fee, it gives the bigger businesses an advantage over the smaller Mom and Pop stores.” The big stores buy in bulk and could afford to give the bags away whereas the little store that has to charge for the paper bags, which cost them more, runs the risk of losing customers who would rather drive a few more miles for a free bag.

Why else do environmentalists consider it so important to charge for paper bags, too? They’re not made from petroleum, so surely they aren’t so bad? Eventually paper bags do decompose, but they take a toll on the environment. According to the Sierra Club, the manufacturing process for paper bags produces 80 percent more greenhouse gas emissions and 50 percent more water pollution than the manufacturing of plastic bags.

“Paper bags are in many ways worse from a carbon perspective,” Brand said. “The real point here is to avoid the waste of single-use bags.”

Paper bags also take up more space. Hannaford’s Blom pointed out that it takes the retailer six times as many tractor trailers to deliver the same number of paper bags to a store as plastic ones. Hannaford, while a member of the Maine Grocers and Food Producers Association – which has lobbied against bag programs – stays neutral on this issue. However, Blom noted that the chain began offering reusable bags for sale as far back as the early 1990s.



## DOMINO EFFECT

Marcia Harrington lives in Brunswick, but she testified on behalf of the Portland bag ordinance. A former resident of Montgomery County, Maryland, she'd seen firsthand the benefits of a plastic ban fee. "It took a little adjustment for some people, but it really created a sea change of behavior. I told them, 'If you pass it, I will bring it to Brunswick.'"

She and a group of 16 others have been trying to do just that since January and not just in Brunswick. About half of the group lives in Topsham, and they're pushing for a bag fee there, as well. Harrington et al. have hit the streets of Brunswick, surveying every business on Maine Street to ask what they'd think of a bag fee. "Of 28 stores, 16 were supportive, 4 neutral and 8 against," she said. They've also polled residents at 22 different events, and Harrington said about 70 percent were supportive. They'll be lobbying the town council (and in Topsham, the selectmen) beginning this month, armed with citizen petitions.

Harrington knows she'll encounter opposition and she and the group, Bring Your Own Bags Midcoast, are going to counter at least one common complaint about bag fees by establishing a fund to buy reusable bags for those who can't afford them. They've already got \$2,000 in the fund.

But as many of these advocates have learned, nothing is in the bag until an ordinance is final. Dennis Andersen, who sits on Kennebunk's Energy Efficiency Advisory Committee, was disappointed when he brought the issue before the Board of Selectmen, first to consider an ordinance and then when that idea was rejected, to put a nonbinding question on the ballot to see what voters thought of a bag fee. "They rejected that too," Anderson said. "They are servants of the people, and it would be good for them to know what the people want. But they didn't want that."

He had to settle for distributing reusable bags to the community instead.

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