

Plastic Bags to Go the Way of the Dinosaurs in Larchmont

Larchmont will be the third Westchester community to successfully ban plastic bags.

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Though their usage is frequently short-lived, plastic T-shirt bags often have a second life floating in bodies of water, dangling from treetops or strewn on the side of the road, a reminder that the bags will outlive their usefulness into eternity as litter that overwhelms the environment.

But in waterfront communities, the presence of the flimsy bags can have a more serious effect. By blowing into oceans or rivers, they are lethal to the fish and marine animals that consume them. Their presence in catch basins blocks their ability to catch runoff, causing flooding.

According to statistics from the [Larchmont Committee on the Environment](#), 100 billion plastic bags are thrown away every year in the U.S., the equivalent of dumping nearly 12 billion oil barrels. Fewer than 10 percent are recycled. According to New York State law, any facility over 10,000 square feet has to have a plastic bag recycling receptacle.

Communities across the country have already banned plastic bags, including Los Angeles; San Francisco; Brownsville, TX; Chestertown, MD; the entire state of Hawaii; Southampton and East Hampton, NY and Westport, CT. In Westchester County, both Rye and the Village of Mamaroneck (VOM) have passed bans, and the [Town of Mamaroneck discussed](#) the possibility last summer (They will reopen the discussion at a public hearing on April 3 at 8 p.m.). The VOM ban will go into effect on April 1.

And now the Village of Larchmont will become the third Sound Shore community to officially ban the abhorrent and non-biodegradable bags. The bag ban was approved at Tuesday's board of trustee's meeting.

Elizabeth Poyet, a member of Committee on the Environment for the Village of Larchmont, said that the Committee became interested in the cause in 2011 and invited Sara Goddard—a member of Rye's Sustainability Committee who spearheaded the Rye plastic bag ban—to speak to them about Rye's success with the ban.

"Many bags blow out to sea where they end up swirling around indefinitely in one of the five gigantic ocean garbage patches," said Poyet.

Pulling out her own reusable bag—which was purchased on a trip to Paris for \$1.20—Poyet said the experience was, "An ah-ha moment for me."

With the help of a committee member, Poyet modeled several reusable bags that have been given out by Larchmont merchants with purchases.

"Walking around with one of these, instead of three or four plastic bags, is cool, it's chic and it's a sign of good stewardship and it says 'I believe in the future,'" she said.

Jonathan Cunitz, a member of the Westport Connecticut Town Meeting and an author and co-sponsor of the 2009 Westport ban, said that the law received extensive support from both residents and local merchants. The Westport law has been used as a model for VOM, Rye, Southampton, East Hampton and Chestertown bans.

"The ordinance is a non-issue; it has resulted in the elimination of plastic bags from the environment and created an environmental awareness that has sparked other environmental initiatives such as the town-wide cleanup to celebrate Earth Day," he said.

Cunitz said that a smoother transition could be achieved if retailers posted signs reminding shoppers of the new ban; had reusable bags available for purchase; and trained cashiers to ask customers with only a few items if they even wanted a bag.

Morgan Stein, a member of the [Mamaroneck High School](#) Environmental Club, noted the large number of bags that ended up in local waters or on school grounds.

"I think if we ban plastic bags we'll send a large message to teenagers in this community that we care about the environment and care about youth," she said.

Critics of reusable bags have cited studies that show E. coli and coliform bacteria growth as prevalent in bags that are frequently utilized.

The solution is simple though, says Goddard, who recommended keeping several bags and throwing them in the wash after each use.

Goddard said that ban in Rye has had no negative effect on local businesses.

“It’s a small change that yields enormous environmental benefits,” she said.

One Larchmont business owner, Bill Homer, of [East Coast Surf, Skate and Snow](#), is ahead of the curve: he’s been utilizing reusable bags since his shop opened in 2009. A lifelong surfer, he said his decision was informed not only by his concern for polluted waters and marine life, but, as the father of four daughters, less pollution for future generations.

“It has not put us out of business,” he said.

As the board unanimously voted to pass the local law, thunderous applause and cheering was heard from supporters in the audience.

The [law will take effect in six months](#)—on Oct. 1, 2013—and prevents any retail establishment from distributing bags, other than those defined as recyclable and/or reusable, to customers at the point of sale. Thin produce bags used for deli meats or other items, dry cleaning bags, bags sized 28” by 36” or larger, newspaper delivery bags, Ziploc bags and restaurant bags meant to prevent spillage of food are all excluded from the ban. The penalty for each violation will be up to \$150.

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article mistakenly referred to a speaker from MHS as Jennifer Morgenstein; her name is Morgan Stein. Also, the word "garbage" was emitted from a quote from Elizabeth Poyet. Patch apologizes for the errors.

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