

Plastic Bags Banned

East Hampton Village follows Southampton's lead

By Bridget LeRoy | August 4, 2011 - 7:40am

The East Hampton Village Board voted on Friday to ban the use of plastic checkout bags in the village, but not before considerable comment from people on both sides of the debate.

Speaking in favor of the ban, Linda James, an East Hampton resident and conservation representative for the Garden Club of America, said that several towns and villages in New York State have adopted similar bans. She said it was a priority for garden club members, and hailed the village as being “on the cutting edge of conservation initiatives.”



Holding up a bundle of plastic bags at an East Hampton Village Board hearing Friday on a new bag ban, Adrienne Esposito of Citizens Campaign for the Environment said, “Changing public behavior is one of the hardest things to do.”

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Dieter von Lehsten of the Sustainable Southampton (Green) Committee showed off the brown cotton bag that he said he has been using for 20 years. “I just wash it and use it again,” he said, adding that Southampton Village, which enacted a bag ban in April, is “just half a step ahead.”

Maureen Dolan Murphy of Citizens Campaign for the Environment pointed that a ban enacted in Washington, D.C., has led to “an 80-percent reduction in one year.” Ms. Murphy, along with Deborah Klughers, both pointed out that fossil fuels are used to create the bags, to the tune, Ms. Klughers estimated, of 1.7 billion gallons per year “in the midst of an oil crisis.”

“Each American uses 300 to 700 plastic bags a year,” she said. “Every hour 200,000 plastic bags hit the landfills.”

However, there were several at the meeting who spoke out against the ban.

Patricia Brodhagen, the vice president of public affairs for the Food Industry Alliance of New York State, a grocery trade organization, said that her group “was in support of the goal and increasing the use of reusable bags,” but “what we don’t do, as an industry, is support a ban.”

“A ban won’t change human behavior,” she said, adding that the industry is concerned about driving the business toward bags made of paper, “which carries with it different economic and environmental consequences.”

Stephen Rosario, from the American Chemistry Council, a trade organization “representing companies engaged in the business of chemistry,” according to its Web site, cautioned against dehumanizing the industry. “These are people who work, ordinary people,” he said, referring to the nine plastic bag companies on Long Island that employ hundreds of workers.

He referred to the seat-belt law enacted in 1984 by New York State, the first state to do so, and said, “New Yorkers don’t like to be told what to do.”

He also stated that there were “legal issues that the village should be aware of,” since the local law would pre-empt state law.

“Changing public behavior is one of the hardest things to do,” said Adrienne Esposito, the executive director for Citizens Campaign for the Environment. “It’s also one of the most meaningful things to do.”

Waldbaum’s is the only chain supermarket that will be affected by the law, as the North Main Street I.G.A. lies just outside village borders.

The Waldbaum’s manager, John Quackenbush, said that he would like to get rid of all bags, which drew applause from both sides. However, he pointed out that the Newtown Lane grocery

store simply did not have the space to change to all paper, all the time. The cost, he added, would be passed on to the customer, as the chain would be unable to absorb the increased price of paper bags. He said the law smacked of discrimination, since the store's customers "from low income areas need to use plastic."

Jeremy Samuelson, a senior environmental advocate with Group for the East End, responded to Mr. Quackenbush.

"I am one of your customers, and I am asking you to support this. It's not about paper versus plastic," he said. "We need to get rid of the idea of this as an onerous, insurmountable task. I say 'ridiculous,' " he continued. "This is not the cataclysmic event that the industry makes it out to be."

After the public hearing was closed, the board voted on the legislation prohibiting the use of retail checkout bags, which does not include plastic produce bags or plastic bags measuring 28 inches by 36 inches or larger.

"Discarded disposable bags pollute our open spaces and our beaches, harm and kill wildlife and aquatic species, clog storm drains resulting in localized flooding, and end up as debris in our oceans and ponds," the law reads, in part.

Mayor Paul F. Rickenbach Jr. thanked everyone for speaking. "That's what democracy is all about," he said. "We respect both sides."

"But sometimes, it takes a village," he said. "And the village stepped up to the plate."

The ban will take effect six months after the notice of the law's adoption is published, which Larry Cantwell, the village administrator, estimates as being early next year.