

Ocean City environmentalists want plastic bags banned to prevent litter

By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer, 609-463-6712 | Posted: Monday, September 14, 2009 |

OCEAN CITY - Today's grocery bag is tomorrow's ocean trash.

That's the message a local environmental group is promoting as it urges Ocean City to ban the ubiquitous plastic bags offered up at convenience stores, pharmacies, supermarkets and stores.

The Surfrider Foundation, a nonprofit group with a chapter in Ocean City, appealed to City Council to ban the plastic bags across the island.

"In coastal communities, it's very easy for a plastic bag to become litter," said Paul Amann, a city resident and member of the group. "It just happens."

Of course, it is questionable whether the city has the authority to tell private businesses what kinds of shopping accessories they can use. But council members last week seemed intrigued by the idea and scheduled a public debate on the issue Oct. 15.

It is not hard to find stray bags, even in carefully manicured Ocean City. The bags get caught on the fringes of the marshes on Bay Avenue or under the Boardwalk. And it's a short jump from these fringe areas to the bay or ocean where the bags release petroleum toxins into the water, Amann said.

"We're looking for a compromise, but I think the ultimate goal would be to get them banned," Amann said.

The group is promoting the use of reusable cloth bags available at supermarkets on the island.

Many grocery shoppers still prefer the convenience of the plastic bags, despite the wider availability of the cloth kind.

"I hate them but I use them," said Margarita Belotserkovskaia of Ocean City as she left SuperFresh with a cart of food tucked in plastic bags.

She said she prefers to use plastic to store meats like chicken. At home, the bags get reused as liners for wastebaskets or returned to the store. She pointed to the bag recycling bin in the foyer.

"It would not be bad if we went back to brown paper bags," resident Shirley Cocchia said. "Our society is too plastic."

She said the plastic bags are probably cheaper than paper. But she would not mind making the switch.

But it might take some time to persuade other consumers to change their habits, the Surfrider Foundation's Amann said.

"I can't blame customers. If you're buying a bunch of items, you need something to carry them in," Amann said. "It's the responsibility of store owners to be conscious of what types of bags they're giving a customer."

One downtown coffee shop recycles bags from other stores when necessary. Positively Fourth Street, a downtown coffee shop, does not use them, owner John Szabo said.

"When you have your own business, you realize how much trash is generated," he said.

The shop uses brown paper bags for its to-go orders, he said. And they encourage customers to use the nylon bags when possible.

Szabo said changing consumer habits could be tough, especially since the plastic bags are so readily available and convenient now.

"When you start out with something like this, it's always an uphill battle, but people eventually find out it's not a big deal," he said.

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