

## Plastic bag ban becoming part of Westport culture

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Jason Benavides, assistant manager at Trader Joe's, saw something on Tuesday morning that would have been unusual a couple of years ago. As customers were being checked out, some of them declined paper bags. Instead, they opted to go back to the parking lot with the items clutched in their hands.

"I had quite a few people willing to carry them out themselves," Benavides said. "They were like, 'That's OK, I'll just carry it.'"

It's a small, seemingly insignificant gesture, but Benavides has seen such things happen "more so than in the past."

After one year and one month since Westport's plastic bag ban went into effect, customers seem to be more willing to bring in reusable bags or not use any bags at all when shopping

"There's a very strong environmental mentality among Westport citizens," said [Jonathan Cunitz](#), one of several Representative Town Meeting members who helped usher in the ordinance in 2008. "So many of them really care. So many shoppers firmly believe in using reusable bags."

The driving force behind the plastic bag ban was concerns about what plastic bags can do to the environment. In a column distributed by Fairfield County-based [E -- The Environmental Magazine](#), plastic bags are described as a "global scourge" that first came into existence in the 1950s as a convenient way to store food. An estimated 92 billion bags are used annually in the United States.

The column notes that while increased demand for paper bags can lead to more deforestation, most paper grocery bags are made from recycled content, and unlike plastic, the paper is biodegradable.

The RTM members have said in the past that the intention of the ordinance was not to wean people off plastic and onto paper. Rather, it's to encourage people to bring in reusable bags when they're shopping.

Once the ordinance was adopted, the town's Conservation Department was charged with ensuring that stores comply. With only one inspector on staff, [Alicia Mozian](#), conservation director, said the department had to be "reactive" rather than "proactive," so they had to respond to complaints rather than investigate on their own.

Early on, there were a couple instances of stores still using plastic bags, but since then things have been quiet.

"It has not resulted in the uproar or non-compliance that I thought it might," Mozian said of the ban. "There were a couple of stores that we worked with that ... had large inventories of plastic bags that they had just ordered, so we ... allowed for their continued use while introducing the reusable bags."

She added, "We didn't want to penalize them monetarily."

Nationwide, the plastic bag ban movement has snowballed since it was first conceived in San Francisco back in 2007. On a global scale, China, India, Australia and other countries have all taken measures to limit the use of plastic bags.

In Connecticut, a bill was proposed that would add a tax to plastic and paper bags with the intention of getting people to use reusable bags. The bill never made it out of the committees amidst a backlash over a section of the bill that would have precluded municipalities from instituting an outright bag ban.

With the bill dead, at least for now, Westport is the only town in Connecticut with such an ordinance, and it's believed to be the first municipality east of the Mississippi to make the ban. Cunitz is hoping Westport doesn't remain the only town.

He's been advising a selectman in Wilton about what the ban has meant for Westport, and he has met with some retailers there to hear their thoughts.

Spreading information about plastic bag bans is also a goal of [Liz Milwe](#), one of the Representative Town Meeting members who pushed for the ban to be implemented. At the end of the month, an art show she started called "In the Bag" ([www.inthe-bag.com](http://www.inthe-bag.com)), which features information about plastic bags and some unique pieces of art intended to show the abundant waste of such materials. One of the items is a sofa upholstered with the bags used when [The New York Times](#) is delivered. Another piece of art is light covered in plastic bags, making it look like a distorted chandelier.

"This came about out of the ban once I started to look at what other communities were doing," Milwe said.

The show will be coming to a close at the [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#) in Manhattan and there are tentative plans for the show to travel to the Children's [Museum in Boston](#) and various Fairfield County towns.

"It really talks about the ban throughout the world," Milwe said.