

STATE URGED TO FOLLOW LOCAL LEAD ON PLASTIC BAG BAN

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STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, APRIL 3, 2019....The statistics Sen. Jamie Eldridge and Rep. Lori Ehrlich ticked off Tuesday to illustrate momentum behind their proposed statewide ban on single-use plastic bags became outdated before the day's end.

Testifying on the bills before the Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Committee, Ehrlich and Eldridge each said more than 40 percent of the state's population lives in one of the 95 cities and towns across Massachusetts that have adopted some form of local bag ban.

Hours later, Eldridge's hometown of Acton would become the 96th community, approving a policy at its annual town meeting that, beginning next year, would prohibit retailers from providing "thin-film single-use plastic checkout bags" to customers.

Brad Verter, founder of the Mass Green Network, said there were seven municipal plastic bag bans in 2015, and he expects there to be 150 -- out of 351 cities and towns -- by the end of the year.

"The people are speaking to you very clearly," he told lawmakers. "They want you to end waste from plastic bags."

The bills before the committee (H 771, S 462) would prohibit stores from providing customers a "single-use carryout bag" -- defined as a bag made of plastic, paper or other material that is not a reusable bag or a recycled paper bag -- at the point of sale, beginning Aug. 1. Stores would need to make recycled paper bags available for a charge of 10 cents and could sell reusable bags to customers for at least 10 cents.

Deb Pasternak of the Massachusetts Sierra Club said a total of 98 lawmakers have signed on to sponsor this session's bill, almost three times as many as did last session.

The Senate has approved bag bans in each of the past two sessions, though neither version included a fee.

The Retailers Association of Massachusetts, in its written testimony on the Ehrlich/Eldridge bills, said that paper bags cost "significantly more per unit," and that members in communities with local bag bans have reported their bag costs increasing three or four times the pre-ban costs.

"We understand that the proposed \$0.10 bag fee is to be retained by the retailer and many of our members appreciate and support that approach as a way to reduce increased bag costs," RAM Vice President William Rennie wrote, before cautioning that many of the association's members "have

also expressed a wariness to charge consumers tomorrow for a bag that they are receiving for free today" and that a bag charge "would be yet another Massachusetts only cost to impact local stores and consumers, while out-of-state and online sellers would see no impact."

Christopher Carozzi, state director of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, said the bills are "simply a tax on grocery bags and do not benefit small businesses or consumers."

Carozzi said many stores already offer a choice of paper, plastic or reusable bag and let customers pick whichever suits their needs.

"Transporting products home in a rain or snow storm with a paper bag would not exactly be beneficial to shoppers," Carozzi said. "Retailers want to ensure the customer is content, but that goal would be unattainable if a consumer's goods tumble to the sidewalk because a shopping bag lacked durability."

The Massachusetts Food Association, a trade group representing the supermarket and grocery industry, offered testimony in support of the bill, but with a later implementation date. The association said phasing out single-use plastic bags "can be achieved statewide if done in an appropriate and sensible timeframe" and that bag fees have been a "huge deterrent."

Brian Houghton, the association's senior vice president of government affairs and communications, called the bill's August 2019 implementation date "unrealistic in the present state of operations for our industry."

"Time is needed for education, operational changes, depletion of plastic bag stock and training," he said.

Kelly Kryc of the New England Aquarium asked lawmakers to pass the bills "without delay" to intervene against plastic pollution in marine ecosystems and "the senseless loss of life caused by products humans use once, and oftentimes just for seconds."

She told the committee about "a majestic, 420-pound leatherback sea turtle" that was brought to the aquarium last November after it became stranded on a Massachusetts beach.

"Our team worked around the clock to try to save its life, to no avail," Kryc said. "A necropsy revealed that the turtle had ingested a large piece of plastic, which was a contributing factor in its death. Leatherback sea turtles feed on jellyfish, and in the murky waters off Massachusetts it's very easy for a turtle to mistake a plastic bag for its favorite food."

Kirstie Pecci of the Conservation Law Foundation said the movement to ban plastic bags is "really rolling right now." She said advocates are not asking people to give up all plastic products but that

most plastic is unnecessary and plastic bags are "one of the most replaceable items and should be the most low-hanging fruit."

Cities and towns in Massachusetts have been hard hit by changes in the international recycling marketplace precipitated by policy changes in China, according to the Massachusetts Municipal Association, which called a statewide bag ban "a step in the right direction toward reforming our solid waste and recycling systems, and addressing some of the financial burden that has been placed on municipalities."

Since the new policy in China went into effect a year ago, the MMA said it has heard from local officials that the cost to haul and process recycles has risen sharply, in some cases to \$100 per ton or more. Plastic bags frequently become stuck in or damage processing machinery and are difficult to remove from the recycling stream, MMA executive director Geoff Beckwith said.

"While we strongly support education efforts that teach and remind residents of proper recycling habits, a statewide ban on plastic bags would go a step further toward disincentivizing the use and misuse of these bags - decreasing costs to municipalities, and cleaning up our communities and the surrounding natural environment," Beckwith wrote.