

Ald. Leary: Sack the plastic bag



CareWell
URGENT CARE

[click for details](#)

Open 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week
for your convenience.

Posted Oct. 9, 2014 @ 1:44 pm

NEWTON

By Alison Leary Mooradian

In 2009, the executive director of the U.N. Environment Programme announced single use plastic bags, which pose extreme hazards to marine life, should be banned or phased out worldwide. "There is simply zero justification for manufacturing them anymore". His office advises U.N. member states on environmental policies.

This declaration accompanied a U.N. report identifying plastic as the most pervasive form of ocean litter. Plastics photo degrade into microscopic pieces, competing with plankton in the food chain, and concentrating persistent organic pollutants, such as PCPs and transforming our oceans into a toxic soup.

Think about shopping for two or three items at your local pharmacy. The cashier puts them in a plastic bag for the 5-minute walk or drive home. The bag stays with us for a thousand years. This momentary consumer convenience ends with us. The bags prove to be devastating in the marine environment, where millions of marine mammals, sea turtles and birds became entangled or ingest plastic bags with fatal consequences.

The sheer number of bags used is staggering; Americans use some 100 billion plastic bags every year, with a fraction of them getting recycled. Most are burned, dumped in the landfill or end up as litter.

Newton currently does not recycle plastic bags. Consumers must bring them back to participating stores for recycling. The recycling rates for plastic bags remain very low. Estimates vary from less than 1 percent to about 5 percent. The economics of plastic bag recycling is very problematic. It costs less to produce a new bag than to recycle one. If recycling worked for this product we would do it.

It's also clear voluntary programs don't work. I participated in a webinar on Plastic Bag and Plastic Film Management sponsored by the Product Stewardship Institute. We discussed programs that have successfully managed plastic bags resulting in dramatic reductions in litter. Only the mandatory programs are shown to be effective. This included Seattle, Wash., where the business manager remarked "a plastic bag is rarely seen anymore". This is not true in Newton where it is all too common to see a plastic bag caught in a tree, or blowing through a parking lot.

The problem remains despite efforts by the Mass Food Association and the state Department of Environmental Protection working together to push voluntary programs to reduce plastic bag use and increase recycling efforts among retailers and supermarkets. Though these efforts are laudable, they have been ineffective. Now they seem to have given up completely. Stop N Shop ended its 5-cent rebate program to customers who brought their own bags.

In Newton, the Plastic Bag Working Group, which includes the economic development director and the director of sustainability, supports this ordinance, and the larger effort behind it, i.e., the whole concept of "zero waste." The idea is to re-use and recycle a product and minimize what we have to throw out. We should stop using products not easily recycled or re-used or posing a problem in our environment.

[» Comment or view comments](#)

[Prev](#) [1](#) [2](#) [Next](#)

An advertisement for CareWell URGENT CARE. The top part shows a group of healthcare professionals in white coats. Below them, the text "CareWell" is written in a large, dark blue serif font, with "URGENT CARE" in a smaller, red, bold sans-serif font underneath. A dark blue button with white text says "click for details". At the bottom, it says "Open 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week for your convenience." in a dark blue serif font. The background of the ad is light blue and white.

Page 2 of 2 - Thousands of communities around the country and around the globe have successfully instituted bans or fees to reduce plastic bag use. This includes California and Hawaii. Here in Massachusetts, Brookline, Great Barrington, Manchester, Nantucket, and most recently Newburyport all have bans on single-use, point of sale, plastic bags. Cambridge, Somerville, Medford, Wellesley and Watertown are all considering bans.

The effort is aimed at working with consumers and retailers to encourage the use of re-usable

bags, not to switch to paper bags, which also have environmental costs to produce. But paper biodegrades and is easily recycled, and it is not made from fossil fuels.

Newton's plastic bag reduction ordinance will have a 6 month phase in period for retailers to use up inventory. Small businesses with retail space of less than 3,500 square feet will be exempt. Enforcement will be a non-issue. The bigger retailers who will be impacted will comply.

Plastic bags have only been around since 1977. So we have managed without them before and the sky did not fall. The solution is so simple; bring re-usable bags. Keep them in your car or your purse. It will take a little practice to get used to, but it's a simple change that we can all do to make a big difference in our environment. Alison Leary Mooradian is a Newton resident.

[» Comment or view comments](#)

[Prev](#) [1](#) [2](#) [Next](#)