

Town of North Kingstown
Conservation Commission

Frequently Asked Questions / Concerns:

The Town of North Kingstown Conservation Commission, in cooperation with Clean Ocean Access, has developed this information to respond to frequently asked questions and concerns concerning a Plastic Reduction Ordinance. Compiled below is a list of questions and answers.

Q: Why do you have to force people to abide by this law instead of just encouraging people to change their behavior?

Over 3,000 volunteers have participated in Clean Ocean Access' beach clean-ups since 2013 and have removed over 40,000 pounds of debris - and this includes over 11,000 plastic bags. It is these results and this information that fuel our efforts, backed by real data. We do not believe that eliminating single-use plastic bags will solve climate change; but eliminating the bags is a good first step to move our town forward as a leader in protecting our environment.

Q: Why is the ban on single-use plastic bags so important?

Plastic single-use bags don't just create litter on our beaches and in our trees. As they never biodegrade, they simply break down into micro particles. These get into our food chain through the seafood that we eat, and from the water we drink from our aquifers, making this a public health issue.

Q: What about those customers who can't afford reusable bags?

This is a valid concern that has been voiced at virtually all public meetings. Two possible alternatives that should be considered are 1) supporting a town-wide bag give-away program, incorporating a logo promoting the program, and 2) possibly exempting SNAP recipients, or seeking them out for the initial distribution of the bags.

Q: Why are these bags categorized as "single-use?" I reuse my plastic carryout bags to line wastebaskets and pick up after my pet.

There are many ways to get additional utility from the material, but the outcome still isn't great. Recycling these bags requires a special facility which uses a great amount of heat. Currently, there isn't such a facility in Rhode Island; so these bags would have to be shipped out of state. If the bag is used for a new household purpose, it will eventually end up in the landfill, and that plastic will be there forever. The average single-use plastic bag has an average use time of 12 minutes, and Rhode Islanders use 9 1/2 million of these bags each year. We are also demonstrating sustainability and reuse; and eliminating these bags is an important first step to this end.

Q: Reusable bags eventually become worn out and end up in the landfill, so what is the point?

Reusable bags do, in fact, have an end of their life and become trash. However, one reusable bag can hold 2-3 times the amount of product that a single-use plastic bag can hold; and one reusable bag can be used hundreds of times. For every reusable bag, we probably eliminate 300-500 single-use bags, and likely many more. We never find reusable bags in the ocean and shoreline. We have not seen them

become a type of litter; and a huge part of what we are working towards is protecting and improving the environment. Landfills are only a temporary fix for waste management. While sanitary landfills can prevent contamination to the watershed, they are essentially mummifying our waste for future generations to deal with.

Q: By eliminating plastic bags, the most common substitute will be paper bags. Aren't those just as bad for the environment?

Our goal is not to proliferate the usage of single-use paper, but we recognize that the initial launch of this proposed ordinance may come with a temporary increase of alternatives - presumably paper. As a consumer-based society, perhaps if we demand that new paper bags be produced in the most efficient manner, we would see dramatic improvements in the process. However, the ultimate goal is for shoppers to bring their own bags. As an incentive to do this, stores could provide a small remuneration for bringing your own, or a small fee for providing a paper one.

Q: What are some viable alternatives to plastic bags that I can use for pet waste at home?

This may take some practice, but these practices work: When purchasing toilet tissue, paper towels, or paper plates, buy them in bulk, and use the bag for your waste basket, or to dispose of animal waste. When purchasing electronics, save the bags that most things come in, and use them for cat litter. If you or your neighbor gets the newspaper, use the plastic bag that the paper comes in for cat litter, or dog waste. Reuse your empty coffee can with resealable lid, and empty once a week on trash day.

Q: What steps can I take to help eliminate the use of plastic bags in my life?

Stop using plastic bags, and get yourself a few durable reusable bags. Skip the wrapping paper for gifts, and give your gifts in reusable bags. Let your favorite merchants know that you support the elimination of single-use plastic bags. Inform all elected officials that you support the elimination of plastic bags. Our goal of moving this forward is to build momentum, and generate more community action, so that we don't rely on government to do what society can do on its own.

Q: Many businesses don't have recycling bins at their store, even though they produce high volumes of recyclable waste.

We have a very good chance of influencing local business with a bottom-up approach. One of the first initiatives we would like to pursue about the bag initiative is to embark on an effort to require business recycling. While this will be an ordinance, we also want consumers to be empowered to make purchasing decisions to reflect their needs. If a store doesn't recycle, don't shop there. We will make it happen!

Q: Why don't you expand the ban to single-use coffee cups and other debris that ends up in the ocean and on beaches?

Single-use foam, paper, and plastic cups do need to be dealt with; and it is indeed on our list of things to address, including straws and balloons. Our approach for the town-wide elimination of single-use plastic bags has a focus on durable, reusable bags, and less on choosing between paper or plastic bags. We feel that by eliminating these bags, shoppers will become more mindful of all single-use items, and gradually change their habits.