

## Plastic bags - not our bag

Plastic, plastic everywhere, but not a bag to throw. The first plastic sandwich bag appeared in 1957, and bread bags became common in the '60s. Plastic shopping bags were introduced to consumers nearly 30 years ago, and our society's consumption rate today is estimated at well over 500,000,000,000 (that's 500 billion) plastic bags annually, or nearly a million a minute. As we prepare for Pay As You Throw (PAYT), we get ready to generate less trash and recycle more. Now that we will be paying for special plastic bags to toss at the transfer station, how can we reduce the volume of other plastic bags that might end up in the waste stream?

The biggest contributor to the plastic bag burden is the pervasive plastic shopping bag. These bags may seem "free" at the checkout stand, but their cost to people, animals, society, and the environment is overwhelming. We pay for those "free" bags by paying higher prices, as retailers pay around \$4,000,000,000 (4 billion) annually for those bags. We see them everywhere, on the beach, snagged on drainage grates, hanging from trees and bushes like balloons in the breeze, and those are just the ones that don't end up at the dump. It's not just a quality of life issue, for some it's a matter of life and death. Tens of thousands of sea turtles, whales and other marine mammals die each year because they mistake plastic bags for food. Single-use bags made of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) can accumulate and persist on the planet for up to 1,000 years. Here in the U.S. we go through about 100 billion plastic shopping bags annually! It takes an estimated 12 million barrels of oil to make that many bags.

The first step to resolving this problem is to refuse the bags at the source; just say, "No, thank you." at the cash register. Bring your own canvas bags or reusable bags to the store, not just the grocery store, but to the clothing store, pharmacy, department store, the mall, and anywhere else you shop. Getting in the habit of bringing reusable bags is the first step toward reduction. They can be purchased just about anywhere these days, at grocery stores, discount and department stores, or online. They are inexpensive, and once you own them you never have to buy more. They will save you money in the long run since you won't be paying to throw them out. Keep them in your car, so you'll always have a handy alternative to plastic bags.

There are many creative ways to reuse plastic shopping bags. You can use them as packing material for shipping boxes or to protect fragile items such as Christmas ornaments and china in storage. Use them for your shoes and dirty clothes when traveling. Keep a few in your car for litter. When you go for a walk, put a couple in your pocket, and pick up litter as you go. Donate bags to food pantries, used bookstores, thrift shops, or other organizations. Instead of stuffing all the bags into one bag, flatten them, fold them in half, and put them neatly into one bag. If all else fails, you can recycle them (#2 HDPE and #4 LDPE) at most grocery stores. Those bags are recycled into lumber and new plastic bags. In Africa, the bags had so overtaken the countryside that entrepreneurs started harvesting them from the trees and landscape, and weaving them into sun hats, doormats, and totes that they export for profit.

Other big volume plastic bag generators are newspapers and bread. Many newspapers come to us daily in plastic sleeves, as does store bought bread. These bags can be reused as food storage bags, dog poo bags, and for any other purpose for which one might purchase plastic bags. Not need to buy plastic bags when there's a scourge of

them on the planet waiting to be reused. Save those bags and use them for sandwiches and what not, but if you end up with too many, you can always offer them on our local Freecycle site at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FreecyclePlymouthMA/>, and within a few hours several people will happily offer to take them off your hands.

Uganda, Australia, Bangladesh, Ireland, Italy, South Africa, Taiwan, Mumbai, India, and others have banned or taken action to ban plastic bags, as have the cities of San Francisco and Beijing. Boston, Berkeley, Portland, OR, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and the state of New York are considering bans. Ikea stores, in their “Bag the Plastic Bag” program, now charge a nickel apiece for shopping bags, and offer shoppers a 57-cent reusable bag. Whole Foods Markets refunds 5 cents per bag when you bring your own, and sells an inexpensive reusable bag.

There is a worldwide trend toward banishing plastic bags from the checkout, but it may take some time. In the meantime, diminishing the demand for plastic bags by refusing to accept them sends a clear message to retailers and bag producers. And when we start PAYT in July, consciously reducing the volume of plastic bags and other recyclables in our trash will result in significant savings for Plymouth households.

The Reusable News is a monthly column by the Selectmen’s Recycling Advisory Committee. This article was written by committee chair, Heidi Mayo.