

Goal: Zero plastic pollution in our waters

By **N. Dini Checko**, ANJEC Resource Center

We all rely on clean water, but pollutants such as single-use disposable plastic items are literally choking our water ways. New Jersey Clean Ocean Action's 2014 annual Beach Sweep data documented that 68.99 percent of debris collected along our State's coastline is comprised of plastic such as plastic bags, bottles and cigarette filters. This is a global issue that can have local solutions. That's why ANJEC is partnering with the US Environmental Protection Agency through the Trash Free Waters Initiative to help educate the public, implement best practices and support legislation to reduce plastic waste. Local partnerships between environmental commissions, green teams, municipal governments, businesses and other concerned community members are needed to implement community-based solutions.

Let's take a closer look at efforts over the past decade to reduce single-use bag consumption. New Jersey residents use about 4.4 billion single-use shopping bags annually. The three main strategies that have been used to reduce this staggering number are to:

- advocate for voluntary reductions in bag use;
- adopt a plastic bag ban ordinance; or
- enact an ordinance imposing a per-bag fee on consumers.

Plastic bag laws are complex; education, data collection and persistence are critical

components for adoption of a single-use bag ordinance.

Based on success rates of compliance around the globe, the most effective strategy is imposing a per-bag fee for both plastic and paper bags, regardless of bag thickness. Why? It allows consumers the flexibility to pay the fee for any bags they might need if they forget to bring their reusable bags or didn't bring enough with them. It assuages retailers' concern that customers will limit their shopping if bags are not available at the store. The retailer also gets to keep any bag fees they collect, so they don't have to worry about accounting for them to a civil authority. Imposing the fee for both paper and plastic bags also minimizes the plastic bag industry's ability to sue on the grounds of unfair advantage to paper bag manufacturers.

Towns leading the way

At the ANJEC Congress workshop entitled "Zero Plastic Pollution in Our Waters," participants learned best practices from Livingston Township and Princeton. Livingston Township Councilman Shawn Klein and ANJEC Trustee Renee Resky, also Livingston Recycling & Reclamation Committee Chair, said they worked with community groups and used a multi-pronged educational approach, including screening the documentary "Bag It" and inviting residents to take a "Living Green"

pledge. They wrote articles for local media, made presentations and encouraged a Bag Challenge at the township's e-recycling event and Family Festival Day.

A major barrier expressed by local businesses in Livingston was that a bag fee would pose a competitive disadvantage with surrounding communities. To combat this concern, environmental commissions should consider working with their counterparts in neighboring towns and other

groups to pool resources and advocate for plastic bag ordinances.

Princeton has been pursuing plastic bag legislation and Bairy Suri, Congress workshop speaker, researched and authored a model disposable bag fee ordinance. Suri is part of grass roots movement to bring this ordinance into Princeton and she offered the following advice for environmental commissions:

Commercial is dumping the bags

By **Pat Smith**, Commercial Township Environmental Commission

The negative impact of single-use plastic bags on our environment is beginning to be addressed by many states. Our county (Cumberland) landfill has made us aware of the amount of land necessary to accommodate the increase in waste material, much of which is plastic bags. They presently have no recycling available for such bags.

In the fall of 2014, the Commercial Township Environmental Commission instituted a one-year pilot program supported by the Township Committee to reduce the number of bags going into the county landfill. The current bags being issued by the majority of stores in our area are not being recycled. Aside from being harmful to wildlife and unsightly on the roadsides, plastic bags have a lifespan of 1000+ years which impedes their decomposition as part of the trash.

We approached the Cumberland County Improvement Authority (CCIA), who helped us immeasurably by providing large recycling barrels with lids, logos showing support of our local Commission and the CCIA, barrel liners and gloves at no cost to our Township. These were placed throughout the municipality. Their only request was



173 Commercial Twp. students from grades 3 to 5 collected mountains of plastic bags to keep them out of the landfills.

that we supply them with collection data periodically. A recycling company offered to take all of our bags, where they are recycled and turned into useful products.

Spreading the word

To encourage public awareness about keeping plastic bags out of the trash, two Commission members presented an assembly program to the third, fourth and fifth grades at Haleyville Elementary School and issued a challenge. The class who brought in the most bags in a week would be treated to a pizza party. The students enthusiastically got involved and brought in over 2000 bags. The classrooms were bursting at the seams.

- Identify key stakeholders (e.g., council members, chamber of commerce, community leaders, etc.) and understand their positions on the topic.
- Organize outreach and education programs aimed at educating residents and retail stores about reducing the use of single-use carryout bags and increasing the use of reusable carryout bags.
- Gather data such as percentage of plastic bags in storm drains and associated

The winning class received pizza and sippy cups supplied by the Environmental Commission. The winning teacher made a math lesson out of counting the bags. Every student in all the classes received free ice cream in the cafeteria. CCIA also provided "recycle" kits with pencils, erasers and a flyer declaring, "SAY NO TO PLASTIC BAGS." Another assembly addressed grades six through eight concerning the issue of the amount of land needed to accommodate all of the county trash, a large percentage of which is plastic bags. The emphasis was on using reusable bags, and CCIA provided each student with such a bag containing information about the program.

We placed notices in public buildings and Township tax bills, and the yearly municipal calendar also included information about the program. For several weeks two local papers ran articles, and we encouraged participants to talk up the program to friends. The program is working well and we plan to continue. We also contacted neighboring townships to encourage them to be a part of eliminating plastic bag waste.

New Jersey has pending legislation concerning the issuance of plastic bags and many states have already banned use of bags that are not reusable or recyclable. We are a small part of the big picture, but it's a start in making people aware of being good stewards of their environment. ♻️

maintenance costs. This data builds a business case that municipal costs for litter cleanup will decrease.

- Do observational bag studies at local stores.

NJ's first bag fee ordinance

In November 2015, the Borough of Longport became New Jersey's first town to pass a single-use bag fee ordinance that stipulates a 10-cents-per-bag charge, with merchants retaining any fees collected. This was a multi-year coordinated effort with neighboring towns Ventnor and Margate, and other organizations such as Surfrider Foundation. Each town has its own green team, but worked together under the banner of "Sustainable Downbeach." This group also received support from Senator Jim Whelan, a key sponsor of NJ Senate Bill S563 "Carryout Bag Reduction and Recycling Act." An identical bill (A1367) is working its way through the Assembly.

Longport found that when several groups band together for a common cause, especially when they are constituents, elected officials are more likely to be receptive and advocate for statewide law. Environmental commissions can also help



The Bag Monster™ is a satirical character that features 500 bags, the average number of plastic bags an American uses yearly.

put pressure on their local Congressional representatives to support the Federal carryout bag bill (*H.R.3977*, the "*Trash Reduction Act*"). This federal bill would place a 10-cent tax on all carryout bags (plastic, paper, and reusable); six of the ten cents would go to the Land and Water Conservation Fund and four cents would stay with the retailer.

ReThink Disposable

Amy Goldsmith, NJ Director of Clean Water Action, introduced the ReThink Disposable program at the Congress workshop. This program targets the replacement of all kinds of single-use products with durable, re-usable alternatives by businesses. ReThink Disposable was launched on the West Coast in 2013 with a year-long pilot program. The 12 participating small food businesses experienced an average savings of \$2000-\$5000 per business and a 25 percent average reduction in single-use plastic.

For example, one food truck replaced disposable food trays with reusable baskets, offered napkins in a self-serve dispenser and eliminated paper burger wraps. These small changes led to an annual waste reduction of 2,568 pounds with cost savings of \$2000. Goldsmith's pilot launch in New Jersey is with Asbury Park's food truck garden.

This structured audit program has many components, including a strong educational piece on consumer behavior. For example, straws are one of the top ten marine debris items found on beaches. While many people don't use straws at home, they are commonplace in restaurants. Getting restaurants to understand the environmental and financial implications of single-use plastic straws might encourage them to wait for customers to ask for straws instead of handing them out automatically.

There are many efforts throughout the State to minimize plastic pollution. Here, at ANJEC, we are helping environmental commissions connect with resources and

act as a clearinghouse for successful initiatives. For example, Livingston Township estimates that the municipal clean-up cost for disposables is an annual minimum of \$176,000 (assuming a 3.2 cent cost per bag, according to the National Center for Policy Analysis).

To help foster local efforts to reduce plastic waste in New Jersey, ANJEC encourages data sharing by municipalities, so please share information about your efforts with the ANJEC Resource Center. (resourcecenter@anjec.org, 973-539-7547)

Sources:

- www.anjec.org/pdfs/Congress2015-LivingstonDisposableBagInitRReskySKlein.pdf
- www.epa.gov/learn-issues/water-resources#our-waters
- Think Outside the Bag – www.njthinkoutsidethebag.com/Home.html
- Plastic Bag Laws, a website for legislative bodies considering laws limiting the use of plastic bags – <http://plasticbaglaws.org>
- Clean Water Action's Rethink Disposable website – <http://rethinkdisposable.org/>
- Clean Ocean Action's beach sweep information – http://cleanoceanaction.org/fileadmin/editor_group2/Beach_Sweeps/2013_Report/AnnualReport2014.pdf
- 5 Gyres, an organization working to restore healthy, plastic-free oceans – <http://5gyres.org>

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