

MASS GREEN NETWORK

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR GREENING MASSACHUSETTS

29 STANHOPE STREET, 3RD FLOOR, BOSTON MA 02116

DATE: 28 November 2017

TO: Michelle Wu, President, Boston City Council
Frank Baker, Councilor
Andrea Campbell, Councilor
Mark Ciommo, Councilor
Tito Jackson, Councilor
Salvatore LaMattina, Councilor
Timothy McCarthy, Councilor
Matt O'Malley, Councilor
Josh Zakim, Councilor
Annisssa Essaibi George, Councilor
Michael Flaherty, Councilor
Ayanna Pressley, Councilor

CC: Marty Walsh, Mayor, City of Boston
David Sweeney, Chief of Staff

RE: **Sixty Community Leaders Request That You Support a Bag Ordinance**

Dear Councilors:

The undersigned group of 60 community organizations, advocates, membership groups, and business leaders in have united to urge the City Council to pass the proposed Ordinance Regarding the Reduction of Plastic Bags in Boston (Chapter 17-19). The Ordinance will significantly advance the City's Zero Waste goals, and it will bring economic benefits to the city's businesses, consumers, and taxpayers. Over the past two years over 50 cities and towns in Massachusetts have passed laws to reduce plastic waste. Now it is Boston's turn.

We ask that in your deliberations you please consider the following facts:

There are too many bags. Every year, Americans discard 100 billion single-use plastic bags.¹ Over **357 million plastic bags are used annually in Boston** alone.²

Momentary convenience, permanent damage. Plastic bags are used for an average of 12 minutes, but a single plastic bag has a life expectancy of up to 1,000 years.³

We pay for “free” bags. The plastic bag industry collects \$4 billion per year in profits from US retailers.⁴ **In Boston alone, local retailers spend almost \$14.3 million per year on bags.** These costs are passed on to consumers.⁵

Plastic bags waste taxpayer dollars. Each month, Massachusetts produces between 100 and 125 tons of bag waste. Plastic bags get caught in our single-stream recycling machinery, causing delay and damage, and contaminating materials that might be recovered.⁶

Plastic bags contribute to global warming. Plastic bags are created from non-renewable resources. More than 1.6 billion gallons of oil are used each year for plastic bags alone. **Bags used in Boston produce over 9,532 metric tons of CO₂ per year.**⁷

Plastic bags are a major source of litter. Even when disposed properly, bags end up in trees, gutters, roadsides, and waterways thanks to their light weight and aerodynamic qualities.⁸

Plastic bags are destroying our oceans. Approximately 8 million metric tons of plastic debris enters the world’s oceans each year. **By 2050, the oceans will contain more plastic than fish.**⁹

Plastic bags kill wildlife. Bags entangle domestic and wild animals and are often mistaken as food. As microscopic particles, plastic displaces plankton in the marine food chain. A recent study found that **25% of fish sold in supermarkets contain plastic debris.**¹⁰

Banning plastic bags and imposing a fee for paper is the most effective way to change consumer behavior. Study after study has shown that bag ordinances are super effective. Without a fee, laws typically reduce bag waste by 60 to 80%. With a modest fee, **bag laws reduce both plastic and paper by more than 90 percent.** The nationwide standard for a bag fee, adopted in Cambridge and proposed in the Massachusetts statewide bill, is 10 cents.¹¹

Because opponents often obfuscate the facts, let us address some of the most common questions:

Isn't plastic better for the environment than paper?

No. This claim comes from a misunderstanding of life cycle analyses that do not account for the larger effects of plastic on environmental ecosystems. Plus, once people stop using plastic bags, they do not switch to paper. Instead, **people quickly grow accustomed to reusable bags.**¹²

Can't plastic bags be recycled?

In theory. But because manufacturing plastic bags is so cheap, recycling them is not cost-effective. Recycling one ton of plastic bags costs \$4,000; the recycled product can be sold for \$32. As a result, **less than 1-5 percent of plastic bags are recycled** each year.¹³

Won't bag laws hurt local businesses?

No. It is true that paper bags are more expensive than plastic. But multiple studies have shown that once a bag law is in place, **consumers become more conscientious and bring reusable bags, saving businesses money.** It was only in the 1980s that plastic checkout bags became so common. **No business has ever failed because of a bag law.**

Don't bag laws hurt the poor?

No. **Reducing waste is an environmental justice issue.** Disadvantaged communities suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation, so they benefit the most from programs to cut litter. Plus, **reducing the amount of money spent on cleaning bag waste frees municipal funds for much-needed social programs.** Remember, bags aren't really free – their costs are just hidden. There are numerous businesses and nonprofits eager to distribute free tote bags. Last year, Cambridge received thousands of donations.

Didn't Austin's bag law totally backfire?

Not at all. **Austin's law created a 75 percent bag waste reduction and has removed 200 million plastic bags -- 50,000 pounds of plastic – annually.** The problem was that some stores began distributing heavy-duty bags that were not designed for reuse, so people threw them out. (The same thing is happening in some grocery stores in Massachusetts – the Star Market in Chestnut Hill, for example – which is why we recommend a threshold of 4.0 mils.)¹⁴

Don't reusable bags spread disease?

No. This claim comes from a ridiculous story about a norovirus outbreak among a girls' soccer team that had nothing to do with reusable bags. The story, spread by industry lobbyists, has been thoroughly debunked. **Washing reusable bags will kill any germs.**¹⁵

Isn't it better to wait for Boston's Zero Waste Plan to be completed?

No. A Zero Waste plan is a complex undertaking, but implementing a bag law is relatively simple – it requires minimal infrastructure, and there are ample local precedents. **Enacting a bag ordinance will be a powerful demonstration of Boston's commitment to Zero Waste.**

Isn't it better to wait for the Massachusetts legislature to pass a statewide bag bill?

The 59 municipalities in Massachusetts that have passed laws to reduce plastic bags have indeed fostered a critical mass in support of a statewide bill. But Boston will be the tipping point. It is the biggest and most important city in New England. **The ordinance you pass will shape policy for the state, and the region.**

Our organizations, with members in every neighborhood throughout Boston and beyond, all concur: **the time for Boston's bag ordinance is now.** We support Chapter 17-19, and will be grateful for your “Aye” vote.

Yours sincerely,

Bradford Verter, Director, **Mass Green Network**
Emily Norton, Director, **Massachusetts Sierra Club**
Jack Clarke, Director of Policy, **Massachusetts Audubon Society**
Stephanie Harris, Massachusetts Director, **US Humane Society**
Sylvia Broude, Executive Director, **Toxics Action Network**
Elizabeth Saunders, Massachusetts Director, **Clean Water Action**
Janet Domenitz, Executive Director, **MASSPIRG**
Erica Mattison, Legislative Director, **Environmental League of Massachusetts**
Scott Cassell, CEO, **Product Stewardship Institute**

Laura Hagen, Deputy Director of Advocacy, **MSPCA**
Neil Rhein, Executive Director, **Keep Massachusetts Beautiful**
Barbara Burgess, Chair, **Women Working for Oceans**
Michael Marsch, Chair, **Surfrider Foundation, Massachusetts Chapter**
Kirstie Pecci, **Zero Waste Project, Conservation Law Foundation**
Joe O'Brien, Executive Director, **ELM Action Fund**
Jamie Rhodes, Program Director, **UPSTREAM**
Ania Camargo, Boston Coordinator, **Mothers Out Front**
Ben Hellerstein, State Director, **Environment Massachusetts**
Lew Finfer, Co-Director, **Massachusetts Communities Action Network**
Laura Wagner, Executive Director, **Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network**
Dawn Tesorero, Coordinator, **Episcopalians Caring for Creation**
Wilmer Quiñones, Youth Engagement Coordinator, **Sociedad Latina**
Maria Belen Power, Associate Executive Director, **GreenRoots, Inc.**
Jenny Sazama, Director, **Youth on Board**
Julia Seremba, Board Chair, **MASSPIRG Students**
Cate Arnold, Faculty Advisor, **Boston Latin School Youth Climate Action Network**
Sierra Rothberg, Troop Leader, **Girl Scout Troop #68277**
Hannah Ono, Head, **Park School Green Club**
Sarah Freeman, Coordinator, **Arborway Coalition**
Bob Tumposky, Coordinator, **350 Massachusetts Boston**
Paula Georges, Board Member, **Boston Climate Action Network**
James Michel, Co-founder, **Boston Clean Energy Coalition**
Alicia Towns Franken, **Beacon Hill Garden Club**
Patricia Tully, Executive Director, **Beacon Hill Civic Association**
Sasha Vallieres, Program Manager, **Charles River Conservancy**
Cathy Horn, Founder, **Keep Hyde Park Beautiful**
Mary Grady, Coordinator, **Ban the Bag Dorchester**
Margaret Van Deusen, Deputy Director, **Charles River Watershed Association**
Ivey St John, Steering Committee, **Charlestown Waterfront Coalition**
Elizabeth Vizza, Steering Committee member, **Boston Park Advocates**
Karen Mauney-Brodek, President, **Emerald Necklace Conservancy**
Jennifer Leonard, Chair, **Southwest Corridor Park Management Advisory Committee**
John Linehan, President & CEO, **Zoo New England/Franklin Park Zoo**
Candice Gartley, Executive Director, **All Dorchester Sports and Leadership**
Rickie Harvey, Chair, **West Roxbury Saves Energy**
Jack W. Gregg, President, **EVUIS Boston**
Laura Parker Roerden, Executive Director, **Ocean Matters**
Eric Magers, Director, **Seaside Sustainability, Inc.**
Janis Owens, Co-Chair, **Sustainable Duxbury**
Gene Wyatt, Executive Director, **Sustainable Solutions**
Marsha Goldstein, Executive Director, **Keep North Attleborough Beautiful**
Cynthia L. Brown, CEO, **Boston Duck Tours**
Tedd Saunders, CSO, **The Saunders Hotel Group**
Nancy Bellantoni, Creative Director, **Movidea, Inc.**
Alma Dell Smith, Owner, **Biobehavioral Associates**

Julie Crockford, Executive Director, **Empower Success Corps**
Todd Saunders, Owner, **Food Truck Nation**
David Colella, VP/Managing Director, **The Colonnade Hotel**
Kurt Cerulli, Chief Executive Officer, **Cerulli Associates**
Sarah Wolozin, Director, **MIT Open Documentary Lab**

¹ Earth Policy Institute and Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2004*.

² Based on a population of 673,184 (2016) and an annual use rate of 531 bags/person. Other estimates are as high as 1,093 bags per person per year. For a discussion of usage rates, see Parsons Brinckerhoff Consulting, *Final Environmental Impact Report, Single-Use Carryout Bag Ordinance, City of Los Angeles*. State Clearinghouse No. 201209053 (May 2013), p. 166.

³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/07/13/eco.plasticbagwaste/index.html>.

⁴ Telis Demos, Bag Revolution, *Fortune*, May 12, 2008.

⁵ Cost based on annual number of bags, with an average cost of 4 cents/bag (which range in cost from 1.5 cents for very thin convenience bags to 10 cents and up for thick boutique bags).

⁶ Testimony of Austin McKnight, Casella Recycling, to Boston City Council, November 2016.

⁷ <https://fooddemocracy.wordpress.com/2008/07/16/plastic-bags-and-oil-consumption/>. Local figure based on a calculation of 0.04 metric tons of CO₂ per 1500 bags. See Parsons Brinckerhoff, *op cit.*, pp. 44-45. For an extended discussion see the report prepared for the Progressive Bag Alliance, a consortium of plastic bag manufacturers, by Boustead Consulting and Associates Ltd., *Life Cycle Assessment for Three Types of Grocery Bags – Recyclable Plastic; Compostable, Biodegradable Plastic; and Recycled, Recyclable Paper* (2007).

⁸ Brendle Group, *Triple Bottom Line Evaluation: Plastic Bag Policy Options*, City of Fort Collins, Oct 2012, 9.

⁹ World Economic Forum, *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*, Jan 2016

¹⁰ C. M. Rochman, et al, Anthropogenic debris in seafood: Plastic debris and fibers from textiles in fish and bivalves sold for human consumption, *Sci Rep* 5, 14340 (2015).

¹¹ See the reports compiled at <http://www.massgreen.org/plastic-bag-impact.html>.

¹² For a discussion of life cycle analyses, see <http://www.massgreen.org/plastic-is-not-greener-than-paper.html>.

¹³ <http://www.cleanair.org/Waste/wasteFacts.html>

¹⁴ See Rosie Newberry, “Reusable bags not fulfilling purpose in Austin,” KXAN, 8/31/2015; and Asher Price, “Report: Post bag-ban Austin uses 200 million fewer plastic bags a year,” *Austin-American Statesman*, 6/9/2015.

¹⁵ See <https://myplasticfreelife.com/2012/05/dont-be-fooled-by-reusable-bag-norovirus-scare/>



Bag in a tree by the entrance to the Massachusetts State House. Picture by Lise Olney