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MASSACHUSETTS CHAPTER

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Ban Plastic Bags

Sponsored by Sen Jamie Eldridge, Rep. Lori Ehrlich, Rep. Frank Smizik
S353/H1990/H1159

This bill would ban non-biodegradable plastic shopping bags in retail stores over 4000 square feet.

Retailers love plastic bags – they're cheap, easy to use, and take up very little space. They're so aerodynamic that even when properly disposed of, they still blow away and become litter. They easily escape from the garbage trucks, landfills, boats, and often average consumers' hands. Not only a visible eyesore, plastic bags are dangerous to wildlife. They are often mistaken as food by marine mammals and seabirds. The United Nations estimates that plastic bags kill 1 billion animals per year¹. These animals suffer a painful death as the plastic wraps around their intestines or they choke to death.

Plastic bags do not biodegrade, they *photodegrade*, which means they slowly break down into smaller and smaller bits that can then contaminate soil and waterways. This process can take 300 to 1000 years. As the polyethylene breaks down, toxic substances from the plastic, inks, and colorants leach into the soil and enter the food chain.²

This bill is a simple ban on these bags from large stores. The goal is to ban or sharply reduce the use of plastic carry-out bags and to bring people together on a tangible environmental issue. We want to reduce the amount of litter around us and to take another step toward cleaner neighborhoods, waterways, and public spaces.

This proposed legislation would prohibit certain retail establishments from providing non-compostable petroleum-based plastic checkout/carryout bags (subsequently referred to as plastic bags) to customers at point of sale locations in stores. As such, it would significantly help reduce the negative financial, energy and environmental impacts associated with the production and disposal of plastic bags.

Plastic bag bans have been implemented in cities, provinces, and countries around the globe, including Nantucket, Westport, San Francisco, Paris, Israel, Canada, Rajasthan (India), Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Taiwan, Singapore, and Modbury (England). A ban (or sharp decrease of) carry-out plastic bags makes sense for the Commonwealth.

Plastic Bag Facts

- It has been estimated that worldwide 4 billion plastic bags end up as litter each year.
- Single-use plastic bags made up about 9% of the debris found along various U.S. coasts.
- The U.S. uses 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year, which are made from an estimated 12 million barrels of oil and cost retailers an estimated \$4 billion
- Production of 1 pound of plastic for shopping bags produces approximately 6 pounds of global warming CO₂
- Plastic bags are not biodegradable, and although they do degrade through mechanical action and *photodegradation* in the presence of light, these processes are slow taking an estimated 300 to 1000 years to occur. This process results in the bags being converted to smaller bits.
- Sea turtles and whales are especially prone to dying from ingestion of waterborne plastic bags since these objects are mistaken for some of their favorite foods (jellyfish and squid) and block their digestive tracks when swallowed.

¹ Marine Litter: A Global Challenge (2009), United Nations Global Initiative on Marine Litter. Available at http://www.unep.org/pdf/UNEP_Marine_Litter-A_Global_Challenge.pdf

² Study by University of Plymouth, UK, Dr. Richard Thompson. Reported by the BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7316441.stm>