

The ban of plastic supermarket shopping bags in Westport began with an idea I had while reading an article on this blight. I went to see our First Selectman about it. He and his staff were not initially supportive, so I asked a friend, Don Wergeles, if he would work on a plan with me. Next, I contacted the mayor's office in San Francisco, where they had initiated a ban, and asked for information and advice. The person in charge of that work (coincidentally a Westport high school graduate) sent some material and was helpful during a couple of phone calls.

Don and I did a lot of research on the issue and developed a strategy to substitute reusable shopping bags for plastic ones. We were still getting strong opposition from people in town and from the chemical and plastics industry. To get through this, we initiated several meetings with town administrators, but we were not getting anywhere. It was clear that we needed to get "insiders" in town government to get involved with this, so we contacted Liz Milwe, my elected representative in Westport town government. She agreed to help and eventually asked three other elected town representatives to join our effort. We briefed them on every detail of our work and research into the issue and then turned our research, material and recommendations over to them. This was necessary because they, as part of town government, had to generate support of their colleagues and move the proposal along through the due process approval process.

Liz and her colleagues in town government did a fine job picking up the proposal and moving it along, despite lots of opposition from others in town government. Meanwhile, I got busy soliciting many letters of support from people in town. Also, I asked a local high school senior if she would be interested in helping. She was — and she enlisted the support of a lot of high school kids.

At the town hearing for the deciding vote on whether to approve a ban on plastic shopping bags, the town hall was packed. Loaded with high school kids and their families. A number of people got up and spoke passionately in favor of the ban. Liz Milwe came over to me and said it still did not look good — too many town officials were not warm about the ban. I decided to get up and say a few words. I said that when the town officials go home that night, go to sleep and wake up in the morning, they are going to remember which way they voted. If they voted against a ban, they might think, "Boy, do I feel good. I voted last night against a ban on plastic bags. That will guarantee continued pollution of our water and open space, continued contamination of the ground where our kids and animals walk, and continued plastic floating out to sound. That makes me feel good."

A few minutes later, at about midnight and still with a standing-room-only town auditorium, the vote was called. The room was dead silent. The vote approving the ban was overwhelming in favor. The entire auditorium erupted in applause and cheers. It was the kind of thing that happens in a feel-good movie. And it is what is almost certain to happen if a state wide ban is enacted. It is time to do this. It is what most people want and it is what our natural environment requires.

Mel Sorcher

Melvin Sorcher, Ph.D.
31 Dogwood Lane
Westport, CT 06880