

Public Hearing on S.B. No. 349 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING SINGLE-USE CARRYOUT PLASTIC AND PAPER BAGS AND THE USE OF REUSABLE BAGS. (ENV)

February 4, 2015

Testimony of Michael Harder, 61 Prentice Hill Road, Hebron, CT

My name is Michael Harder, and I have been a resident of Hebron, Connecticut for over 26 years. First I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on this important bill.

Prior to my retirement in 2006, I had the good fortune to have spent my entire career working for the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, the last few years as the Bureau Chief of the Bureau of Waste Management. Since retirement I have assisted the Town of Hebron in a volunteer capacity on environmental matters, mainly related to solid waste and recycling, so this issue is of great interest to me.

While plastic bags are useful in some ways, as you know they cause several environmental problems. They are a significant component of litter, often with lethal impacts to fish, birds and other wildlife. Also, they are not easily recyclable and in fact often interfere with modern recycling systems, increasing costs and making them less efficient. Finally, single use bags, whether plastic or paper, are usually thrown in the trash, representing a waste of resources and an unnecessary source of air pollution and greenhouse gases.

My general comment on this proposal is that I agree completely with the goal of the bill, to phase out the use of single-use bags. It would represent a significant step in dealing with the problems I mentioned above, and would help to strengthen Connecticut's position as a national leader in environmental protection.

I do have a few concerns regarding some of the interim requirements, especially it's application to all convenience stores regardless of size. This will be a lightning rod for criticism. My concerns are that most of the interim requirements, especially the education, training and take-back programs will at least be perceived as burdensome for small stores. Those requirements will not only be targets for those opposing the bill, but assuming they are put into effect, will make it difficult to comply.

To deal with these concerns I would offer a few suggestions. First, I would put less emphasis on the interim period, focusing mainly on the goals of eliminating single use bags by a date or dates certain. We could eliminate the interim requirements to create the education, training and take-back programs for all except larger stores, and just establish a clear schedule by which all stores must comply with a ban on single use bags. There could be different dates for different size stores so small stores have more time. Rather than making every store implement education and training programs, you could also fund a state effort in conjunction with the larger stores so a more consistent message is put out there. Or recognizing the reality of the state budget, just requiring the large stores to do it might be enough - almost everyone goes to a large store from frequently and would get the message soon enough.

In this option I would also eliminate the fee requirements, except perhaps for larger stores, since the programs they intend to fund would not exist.

Another approach would be to retain some of the interim requirements, but not all. For example, you could keep the requirements for most stores to create education and training programs, but I would still eliminate the take-back requirements for smaller stores. They will sunset anyway, and everyone can easily recycle paper bags already, so there's no reason to require stores to take the paper bags back. Under this scenario we would only lose the plastic bag take back at smaller stores but for only the interim period, a reasonable trade-off I think.

Under any of these scenarios, I would strongly recommend that the requirement for larger stores to establish a take-back program for plastic bags be retained, even after the final ban is effective. If this is problematic, then municipalities should be required to do it. It's amazing how many plastic bags and other plastic film waste is still generated, even when using reusable shopping bags (wrappers for bread, fresh produce, paper products, zip-lock bags, newspapers, magazines, to name just a few). Since neither municipal nor private recyclables collection systems accept plastic bags, we desperately need a place to bring that material. To their credit, many if not most large grocery stores accept plastic bags for recycle, so a state-wide requirement to do so would be a logical and important step to take.

Finally, I would start the penalty schedule at a lower amount, no higher than \$500 per day per violation, and maybe less. A \$1,000 minimum penalty will be a disincentive to most towns taking action, at least initially. Even if a smaller penalty is assessed, the negative publicity will be a problem for the violating stores, and in most cases should help to keep them in or quickly return them to compliance, which is what we want. Penalties for continuing violations could still reach significant levels.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this bill.

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