

ULSTER COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COUNCIL



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MEMORANDUM OF SUPPORT

June 29, 2018

To the Ulster County Energy and Environment Committee:

The purpose of the Ulster County Environmental Management Council (EMC) is to review and advise the Ulster County Legislature, Ulster County Executive, and local governments on present and proposed methods of using, protecting, and conserving the environment for the benefit of all the people in the County. The Council, appointed by the Ulster County Executive and confirmed by the Ulster County Legislature, is comprised of municipal representatives, who sit on town-level environmental councils and boards (that is, town-based ECCs and CACs), as well as at-large members. The EMC includes current and former government-agency employees and concerned citizens with expertise in environmental issues.

The EMC supports the proposed county legislation to ban single-use plastic bags. We strongly urge legislation that concurrently institutes a fee on paper and other single-use bags. The ban/fee structure has been shown by many scientific studies to be most effective in protecting the environment by motivating the public to bring their own reusable bags when shopping.

The reasons to ban single-use plastic bags are many. New York State residents use 23 billion single-use plastic bags per year. These litter our roadways, clog our storm drains, enter our oceans and waterways, and harm and kill marine life and wildlife. At the present rate, by 2050 there will be more plastics in the ocean than marine life. Additionally, when plastic bags enter the machinery at recycling operations, they clog and slow the system, thus making recycling more difficult and generating an economic cost.

Furthermore, plastic is a fossil fuel product made from natural gas or oil. Both Governor Andrew Cuomo and Ulster County Executive Mike Hein have made strong statements and plans to reduce fossil fuel use in the state and county, respectively. The EMC strongly supports the Governor and County Executive's efforts to reduce the use of fossil fuels, including the reliance on fossil fuels for plastic products.

Lastly, we support a fee on paper and other single-use bags as part of the legislation. Studies show that when single-use plastic bags are banned and no fee is instituted on other bags, the population generally shifts to paper rather than bringing their own bags. Paper bags have their own negative environmental impact, and they cost merchants more than plastic, thus causing hardship to businesses. Some stores shift

to thicker plastic bags not covered by bag laws, and that results in even more plastic entering the environment. A fee on other bags will avoid these negative results.

The EMC supports a total ban on single use plastic bags up to a determined thickness, and the surcharge of 5 cents on any bags other than reusable bags. We support this policy being applied across the board to all retailers, big and small. We also support the production of educational materials and programs designed to help consumers learn a new way of shopping—that is, the simple act of bringing reusable bags or boxes. Education is crucial for a ban/fee to be instituted effectively. We support placing the responsibility for enforcement of this new law in the hands of one of the existing enforcement agencies within the county. Enforcement, like education, is crucial for this law to be effective.

Ulster County is making a heroic—and successful—effort to be a leader in environmental practices in our state. The State of New York is now considering action on plastic bags, but it is unclear what that action will be and how long it will take. Ulster County's ban on plastic bags, and fee on other single-use bags, can send a strong message to Albany and exemplify the best form for a bag law to take. It can also potentially supply data on the result of such a law. In this way, a county law will not only help our own environment and economy, it may also potentially help our state.

This law is not radical and it is not a "stretch." Since 1994, when Denmark became the first country to ban or put a fee on plastic bags, many other countries have done so, including China and seven other Asian countries, South Africa and fourteen other African countries, England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, five European countries, Mexico, and Brazil. Many cities and counties in the U.S. and Canada have also enacted laws. Results in all these places show that consumers quickly re-learn their habits and soon bring reusable bags when they shop. And all of these places also show environmental benefits.

The EMC thanks the Energy and Environment Legislative Committee for its leadership in Ulster County's considerable environmental progress and, in particular, for its leadership around the plastic bag law. We support this law and look forward to seeing it passed and enacted.

Sincerely,

J. David Haldeman



Dave Haldeman

Chair, Ulster County Environmental Management Council

Cc: Michael P. Hein, County Executive
Kenneth J. Ronk, Chair of the Legislature