



FROM TOWN HALL

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When asked to list the reasons they decided to move to our island, Seabrookers will list the beach, island amenities and, always, the island's natural beauty and its wealth of wildlife. So odds are that if you live on Seabrook Island, you are some degree of an "environmentalist" and support protecting and preserving the many elements of the environment you call home.

Seabrookers enjoy a maritime forest that surrounds inlets, waterways, and salt marshes that open to sand dunes and miles of beach, portions of which are designated by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as critical habitat for endangered species, including the loggerhead turtle. The endangered right whale travels through protected waters off our shore. We take pride in our rare strand-feeding dolphins. Based on counts by the Seabrook Island Birders club, there are at times more than 100 species of birds on our island and in our backyards. And other wildlife sightings are cherished and recorded. Sadly, one

of the major threats to all these island treasures is plastics pollution.

The Seabrook Island Town Council initiated a discussion at its January Ways and Means meeting about how the Town could best address the threat from plastics. At the top of the discussion list is whether the Town should ban single-use plastic bags. Several neighboring communities have already done so, including Folly Beach, Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island, Mt. Pleasant, Hilton Head, Beaufort, Beaufort County, and the City of Charleston. And at this writing, the James Island Town Council is also well into the process of adding a plastic-bag ban to its ordinances. At the January meeting, the Seabrook Council determined that additional preparatory work was needed before it could consider whether to proceed.

Why are these bans being enacted by our South Carolina neighbors (and across the country)? Single-use plastic bags, those that we generally know as grocery bags, are made from some form of polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which is a nonrenewable petroleum or natural gas by-product. PET bags can be recycled (although only about 2% are) but the material is not biodegradable. As such, the plastic bags are a major source of litter, a headache for waste managers, and life threatening to wildlife and possibly to humans.

Birds and marine life are particularly susceptible to the dangers of plastic bags. Sea turtles often mistake them for one of their favorite foods, jellyfish. The bags then create intestinal blockages that eventually starve and kill the turtle. Plastic bags can also become caught on waterfowl or coral and wrap around the animals, causing injury or death. While not biodegradable, plastic bags do break down into pieces, eventually turning into a grainy dust referred to as microplastics that negatively impact the food web. One study shows microplastic ingestion can cut oyster reproduction rates nearly in half. There is also mounting evidence that microplastics are already in the food chain consumed by humans.

The single-use plastic grocery bag is not the only plastic offender, but the communities banning them suggest they are a major problem and their ban is a start toward encouraging less dependence on plastics. Generally, the bans prohibit merchants from using bags for merchandise or food take away. The City of Charleston's recently enacted ban, which takes effect January 2020, also extends to plastic straws and foam food containers.

Most of the enacted bans exempt dry cleaning bags; newspaper bags; bags for garbage, pet and yard waste; and bags containing prescription drugs or

other medical or veterinary products. The bans also all include provisions encouraging merchants to offer recyclable and/or compostable bags to their customers and to promote the use of re-useable take-away bags. The bans in our sister coastal communities provide for an enforcement mechanism (a hurdle for our Town's limited staff) and a range of monetary penalties.

Should the Town of Seabrook Island enact a plastic bag ban, its scope would not be as far reaching as Charleston's and those in other municipalities as there is not a grocery store or large box drug stores within the Town's limit. The Seabrook Island Club would be impacted as well as businesses at the gate and at Bohicket Marina. Freshfields' merchants are all located in the Town of Kiawah Island.

If Council decides to move forward with this initiative, it would follow a specific process before it would and/or could enact any type of plastics ban. That process would include a public meeting to receive input from stakeholders and the community. Should Council then consider an ordinance, the process would include a first and second reading and a public hearing at which residents would be provided an opportunity to comment on the specific terms of the ordinance. Stay tuned...▲