

PLASTIC BAG REDUCTION BYLAW

INFORMATION & FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)



Auburn's Plastic Bag Reduction Bylaw passed in October 2019 and has been on hold due to COVID-19, however it will be implemented this fall. This bylaw prohibits single-use plastic carryout bags, defined as a plastic film-type bag with or without handles, which is 4 mils thick or less, provided to carry items purchased or serviced. Businesses are allowed to distribute recycled paper bags or reusable carryout bags, and consumers can bring their own bags comprised of any material into a store, as long as they are clean. Packages containing several plastic bags, such as sandwich bags or garbage bags are exempt from this bylaw, as well as produce bags, deli bags, prescription medication bags, and dry cleaning bags are also not affected by this bylaw. A full list of exemptions can be found in the bylaw.

Why does Auburn need a plastic bag bylaw?

- Plastic bag laws have been passed in 139 municipalities statewide, going back to 1990. Due to their light weight makeup, they are able to easily travel long distances by wind and water, making them the most common litter which is unsightly and harmful to the environment. Plastic can take thousands of years to completely degrade, negatively impacting wildlife and marine life for generations. In most instances, the plastic breaks up into microscopic pieces which end up in our soil, waterways and oceans.
- Plastic bags are the major contaminant in single-stream recycling, and drives up increased municipal costs.
- Production of plastic bags requires fossil fuels, creating greenhouse gases which contribute to climate change.

When does the ban go into effect?

- October 1, 2021

What type of bag will this apply to?

- The bylaw will require retail establishments to provide alternative options to single use carryout plastic bags 4 mils thick or less. Bags that are acceptable for use include recycled paper bags or reusable carryout bags.

Are there any exceptions for plastic bags with this bylaw?

- Examples of exempt plastic bags include those that are intended for prescription medications, dry cleaner bags and thin plastic bags you would find in the deli or produce section of a supermarket for food. Bags used to protect against hazardous materials or harmful chemicals, and prevent items from damage or contamination are also exempt.
- A complete list of exemptions is listed in the bylaw.

What is a mil? Why do the bags need to be thicker than 4 mil?

- A mil is a unit of measurement used to determine the thickness of film plastics. The typical plastic carryout bag provided by retailers is less than one mil. A plastic bag thicker than 4 mils is quite sturdy and clearly intended for multiple uses.

Are paper bags allowed to be used as an alternative?

- Yes, 100% recyclable paper bags are an eco-friendly alternative to plastic bags. These paper bags shall contain a minimum of 40% postconsumer recycled materials are allowed for use and they must display on the outside of the bag, the words "100% recyclable" and "40% postconsumer recycled content." However if the retailer is using a smaller bag that is 8lbs or less, then it can be 20% post-consumer recycled content with the same labeling requirements.

Can plastic bags be recycled?

- Many people are unaware that plastic bags cannot be recycled curbside with single-stream recycling, making them the number one single-stream recycling contaminant. Plastic bag recycling requires special equipment, which cannot be found at all recycling facilities. Some supermarkets collect plastic bags to be recycled with their film plastic, which is often turned into composite lumber. You can typically find plastic bag recycling containers at a retailer store's entrance or exit.

What can the public do to help the community with this bylaw?

- Be aware of the bylaw and do your part by using reusable bags. Plastic bags can be repurposed in your home as small trash bags, or used to collect litter around your neighborhood. Remember to keep plastic bags out of your curbside recycling cart, and drop them off at a supermarket collection site for proper recycling.

What type of retail establishments are affected?

- A retail business selling or providing merchandise, goods, groceries, prepared take-out food and beverages, or the service of an item, directly to customers. This includes but is not limited to businesses such as grocery stores, department stores, pharmacies, convenience stores, restaurants, and coffee shops. Businesses engaging in retail activities such as farmer's markets', public markets, food trucks or other motor vehicle, mobile canteen, trailer, market pushcart, roadside stand, and nonprofit organizations engaging in retail activity are also responsible to comply with this bylaw.

Can a business charge a customer for a bag?

- Yes, businesses are allowed to charge customers for any type of compliant carryout bag. The business establishment shall retain any collected fees. However, businesses are encouraged to promote the use of reusable bags with their customers. Signage reminding customers to bring their own bags to the store helps the business use less bags and meets the intent of this bylaw.

What is considered a reusable bag?

- A bag is considered reusable if it meets the following criteria: has handles made of washable, cloth, hemp, or other fibers, fabrics or materials and is designed and manufactured specifically for multiple uses. Many businesses already offer reusable grocery or merchandise bags for sale at the register for a nominal fee.

Can my store still sell plastic bags in general?

- Any packaging containing several bags, including but not limited to, food bags, sandwich bags, yard waste bags, or garbage bags can still be sold. This bylaw only prohibits the distribution of single-use carryout bags provided by a retail establishment to customers to carry items purchased or serviced.

Where on the Town website can find the bylaw online?

- Information can be found on the Town of Auburn website at www.auburnguide.com/190/Solid-Waste-Recycling-Division

Do you know of any resources for compliant bags?

- The Board of Health has prepared Bag Resource List that is available under the Plastic Bag Ban tab of the link listed above.

Where do I go if I have questions about the bylaw?

- The Board of Health is the municipal department that is responsible for implementation and enforcement of the Plastic Bag Reduction Bylaw. Please contact the office at 508-832-7703 with any questions regarding this bylaw.