

April 6, 2016

Dear Wellesley Town Meeting Members,

You have received a great deal of information in preparation for the current Annual Town Meeting, and we appreciate your dedication in spending so much time considering the important issues that our town faces. Next week, you are likely to be voting on the NRC proposal to ban single-use plastic check-out bags and we would like to offer some comments on a letter you received on March 28 from Lee Califf, the Executive Director of the American Progressive Bag Alliance and Plastics Industry Trade Association.

As far as we know, Mr. Califf has no connection to Wellesley.  The purpose of his organization is to promote and sell plastic bags. Perhaps for this reason, Mr. Califf makes a number of misleading statements in his letter against the NRC’s proposal. We would like to correct some of these statements.

*Mr. Califf mentions that some plastic bags from some manufacturers may include some recycled material.* Our primary objection to plastic bags is that they harm the environment -- and that is true whether they contain recycled plastic or virgin plastic. Plastic bags do not biodegrade; they simply break apart into smaller and smaller pieces and remain in the environment for thousands of years. Bags can also do damage before they break down; wildlife can be suffocated or strangled by bags or they may ingest the bags, mistaking them for food, and die from intestinal blockages.

*Mr. Califf states that plastic bags are “100 percent recyclable and highly reused.”* Plastic bags may be 100 percent recyclable in theory, but according to the EPA, only 5.2 percent of the bags produced in the U.S. are actually recycled. In any case, the Wellesley Recycling and Disposal Facility stopped accepting plastic bags for recycling in 2015. Waste Management -- the largest private trash hauler in the United States -- has also stopped collecting plastic bags for recycling. The bags are notorious for harming recycling efforts by jamming the sorting lines in material recovery facilities. It is true that some bags may be reused once to line a trash can or to collect dog waste -- and then the bag winds up in a landfill.

*Mr. Califf cites two towns that have chosen not to restrict plastic bags.* Twenty-one communities in Massachusetts have now voted in favor of bans and many more are considering it. We trust Wellesley Town Meeting Members to make up their own minds about what is right for Wellesley.

*Mr. Califf suggests that cities have experienced negative effects from bag restrictions.* The references Mr. Califf cites are largely anecdotal reports from other states and are not supported by our research on bans in Massachusetts and elsewhere. For example, the town of Brookline has had a ban in effect since 2013 and has not experienced a discernable drop in business or any of the other effects mentioned by Mr. Califf. Last summer, Wellesley volunteers conducted a survey of more than 30 Wellesley businesses and most business owners thought that a bag ban would have no effect on their businesses. Whole Foods stopped distributing plastic check-out bags in all their stores in 2008 and did not experience any decline in their business. Nantucket has had a bag ban since 1990 with no known ill effects. We know of no job losses due to plastic bag bans. Indeed, bans increase the demand for more sustainable alternatives. Recently, Novolex, a leading manufacturer of plastic bags and member of Mr. Califf’s organization (APBA), purchased Duro, the largest paper bag manufacturer in the world in order to increase offerings to customers who prefer paper bags. Duro employs more than 1800 people at 11 factories throughout the U.S.

*Mr. Califf states that the Massachusetts Food Association and Department of Environmental Protection had reduced the number of plastic and paper bags distributed by 33 percent by 2010 in a voluntary program.*The MFA/DEP program never got beyond 33 percent reduction, giving further impetus to bag bans across the state. Such voluntary efforts are insufficient and too slow to address this enormous and still growing problem. A ban on single-use plastic check-out bags will achieve a 100 percent reduction of these plastic bags.

*Mr. Califf asserts that plastic bags are not a significant contributor to waste or litter.*Because they weigh very little, plastic bags are a small percentage of the overall waste *tonnage* in the U.S. as compared to other, heavier materials in our waste stream. However, Americans use approximately 100 billion plastic bags every year, and only 5.2 percent are estimated to be recycled. That sounds like a “significant contributor” to us.

*Mr. Califf maintains that plastic bags are not a root cause of marine debris problems.*The damage to marine life by plastic bags is extremely well-documented. The New England Aquarium is among the leading marine research institutions calling for bans on plastic bags.

*Mr. Califf makes an odd comparison between the materials used to make single-use plastic check-out bags and the materials used to make reusable bags.*In addition to being an apples to oranges comparison, the distinction between “foreign oil” and “domestic natural gas” is irrelevant to the case we are making for a bag ban. Single-use plastic check-out bags are made from unsustainable materials that harm wildlife and our environment. The fact that they are made from domestic sources of fracked gas is not, in our view, a point in their favor. We share Mr. Califf’s concern that reusable bags made of plastic are becoming a problem and hope the APBA will start to address that as well with education and recycling. However, reusable bags are a better choice for the environment than single-use plastic check-out bags.

The inclusion of so many false and misleading comments in a letter to Town Meeting Members is an indication that this organization is simply using any means available to defend their own industry: making plastic bags.

Wellesley has an opportunity to consider and address this issue by looking at the facts and having a thoughtful discussion about what is best for our community and our planet. We believe that Mr. Califf’s letter adds little to that discussion.

Respectfully yours,

Quentin Prideaux, President, Sustainable Wellesley

Jessica Stanton, Wellesley Green Schools