The Responsible Exercise of Freedom:

In Support of a Plastic Bag Ban

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A bylaw banning thin, disposable plastic shopping bags has been proposed for Plymouth’s fall town meeting. Some in opposition to the measure voiced concern that such a ban takes away their personal choice and, along these same lines, state that we have “too much government regulation”. Others, supportive of the ban, often express concern over the damage these bags are doing to our world and feel a responsibility to themselves and to future generations to try to do something to reduce or eliminate the negative impact.

This struggle to balance personal rights with responsibility for the broader good of our communities, for future generations and for our world has been one of the central philosophical and political issues vexing the citizens of our nation since its inception.

Over-regulation, just like anything done to excess, is generally wasteful and at times harmful. However, it was government regulation that banned Freon, which was responsible for the hole in the ozone layer that has now begun to close. It was government regulation that cleaned up Boston Harbor to the point where we can now swim in it. It was government regulation that eliminated DDT that was a pesticide tied to many serious harmful impacts to human and animal life. Government regulation led to the catalytic converter and it is government regulation that promoted emissions standards for industries that have improved our air quality. Good environmental regulations do good things and not regulating could at times lead to perhaps irreversible harm.

*The case for intervention*

The need for regulation is significant when considering the impact of disposable plastic bags. These bags are polluting our oceans. These bags are killing millions of birds, 100,000 sea animals every year and affect over 300 species on land and in water. They do not biodegrade as they break down into micro particles that never go away (every piece of plastic that has ever entered the ocean is still there). The manufacture of these bags contributes to tons of greenhouse gases being released into atmosphere annually. And according to the EPA, no more that 14% of these bags are recycled despite years of programing designed to promote voluntarily doing so. The vast majority end up in the trash. And based on trade industry figures, an estimated 18 million or more disposable bags are distributed in Plymouth each year from just the supermarkets alone. The numbers are huge.

So people have a decision to make. Do they recognize the magnitude of the problem and its seriousness? If you do, than you will support the Plastic Bag Ban. Will it call for some inconveniences? Yes, but we believe those sacrifices to be minimal compared to the cost of the continued degradation of our environment.

Yes, if you forget to bring your reusable bag, it is frustrating. However, the primary reason most of us forget is because it’s been made easy not to remember. That is, if we realize we forgot our bag, we promise ourselves to do better in the future and just take the plastic. But if there is no plastic bag available, then the times we forgot to remember will quickly start to stick in our minds. And pretty soon our behavior changes. We just get in the habit of remembering. The transition is not hard and once done, it becomes second nature.

36 towns in Massachusetts, 16 in just the last year, have voted to do ban the thin carryout shopping bags. Many more have similar bans coming before their voters this year and next. Soon the entire Cape and Islands may restrict these bags. The Boston City council has moved consideration of a ban to the fast track. Chicago, Washington D.C., NYC, LA and over 300 jurisdictions in the United States covering 60 million people have bans. 40 nations covering 4.5 billion people have restrictions on these bags. And more bans are being passed everyday.

So if you believe that personal freedom comes along with personal responsibility, that the two are inseparable, than you have a choice to make. We hope that once you understand the degree of the problem that exists, you will support this ban.