

# Regulating Single-Use Plastics

In Your Municipality | Chester County, PA



## ⚠️ The problem with single-use plastics

**Human health hazards and risks.** The EPA guidebook on “Best policies for Solid Waste Management” noted plastics contain toxic materials and endocrine disruptors which increase cancer risks (lung, liver, etc). Also, plastic litter is broken down into microplastics that spread throughout the environment and into our bodies through contaminated water, air, and soil supply. ▶

**Major source of litter.** The PA DEP found that out of the 502.5 million pieces of litter on Pennsylvania’s roadways 30% were plastic materials. Chester County Solid Waste Authority reports 80% of litter in the county is single-use plastic.

**Threats to wildlife.** Approximately 80% of litter found in aquatic environments is plastic according to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), which is responsible for reducing the health of rivers and streams by degrading habitat for plants and animals, introducing toxic chemicals, as well as restricting the free flow of water. ▶

**Greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).** Our World in Data estimated 3.3% of global GHG emissions were directly from plastic production and disposal. Switching from single-use to reusable products can reduce greenhouse gas emissions generated by plastic production and disposal. ▶

**Recycling challenges.** The EPA reported 8.7% of plastic in the US was recycled in 2018. Limited recycling is due to impurities in materials, recycling facilities not being able to recycle most plastic, sorting issues, and complex plastic products. Plastic bags clog recycling machines, reducing efficiency of material recovery facilities.

## Single-use plastic ordinances—best practices

As of March 2024, six municipalities in Chester County have passed an ordinance to ban single use plastic bags, polystyrene take-out containers, and/or plastic straws. These ordinances are similar to each other in structure and content but contain subtle policy differences. Penn Environment has created a model single use plastics ordinance which many municipalities use as a starting point. ▶

When drafting an ordinance, there are several best practices that lead to simpler enforcement, higher rates of compliance, and higher rates of plastic reduction.

- Avoid exemptions.** Exempting certain business types or people (such as low-income) from complying with the ordinance weakens the goal of reducing plastic and creates confusion for retailers, residents, and local government staff enforcing the ordinance. Instead, provide a period of time (90 days is common) between ordinance passage and effective date for commercial establishments to plan for paper bag substitution costs and use any remaining plastic bags, and for residents to obtain alternate bags.
- Differentiate between food packaging bags and carry out plastic bags,** as food packaging is not controlled by local grocery store management.
- Consider requiring a fee for paper bags.** Ordinances can require or allow commercial establishments to charge a 5–25 cent fee for any single-use paper bags (15 cents is common). This greatly reduces the incidence of customers opting for a disposable (paper) bag. Paper bags are more expensive than plastic bags for retailers, so the fee allows them to recover this cost. The most effective ordinances restrict single-use plastic bags from being offered for a fee.
- Include specifications for compliant bags.** Businesses may wish to still offer single-use bags made of materials other than plastic. The ordinance should specify what types of bags can be supplied, including a minimum threshold for recycled content.

## Compliance and enforcement

At the time this fact sheet was created, no Chester County municipality had data related to compliance with the single-use plastic ordinance. The City of Philadelphia has had a single-use plastic ordinance in place since 2019. The city released an efficacy study in 2023 which found a 94% decrease in the proportion of consumers using plastic bags in grocery stores.

All Chester County municipalities that have passed a single-use plastics ban are enforcing the ban with the help of existing municipal staff, though the staff person assigned varies across municipalities. All municipalities use a complaint-driven system for issuing citations.

## Business attitudes

Several municipalities in our region (Lower Merion, Tredyffrin, and Easttown Townships) surveyed businesses during the process of considering a single-use plastics ordinance. Survey results yielded similar results across municipalities: businesses were largely supportive of efforts to reduce single-use plastics.

**86–100%** Supported measures to reduce the use of plastic bags

**93–100%** Supported implementing a 10-15 cent bag fee at checkout (Tredyffrin 93%, Lower Merion 100%)

## Resident attitudes

While exploring passing a single-use plastics ordinance, several southeast PA municipalities surveyed their residents to gauge their opinions. Overall survey results from Abington, Upper Gwynedd, and Tredyffrin Townships revealed support for the municipality intervening to reduce plastic bag usage.

**63–88%** Supported initiatives (government intervention, bans, customer fees) for reducing single-use plastic usage in their region

**12–34%** Opposed initiatives for single-use plastics reduction

**0–12%** Unsure about implementing these initiatives

## Do single-use plastic ordinances work?

According to PennEnvironment, single-use plastic bag bans can eliminate about 300 single-use plastic bags per person each year.

A study released in January 2024 on plastic bag bans from a collaboration with Frontier Group, Environment America Research & Policy Center, as well as CALPIRG Education Fund found the following: ▶

- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania eliminated 200 million plastic bags in grocery stores annually since 2021.
- Austin, Texas showed 90% reduction in plastic bag litter six months after ban was effective.
- San Jose, California had a 78% decrease in SUP bag litter found in creeks and rivers in 2012 after ban was effective.
- New Jersey coast gathered 46% fewer single-use plastic bags one month after ban was effective.

## Resources

PennEnvironment's single-use plastics model ordinance ▶

EPA's Best Practices for Solid Waste Management: Addressing Plastic Waste ▶

Lower Merion Township, PA "Give a Bag, Take a Bag" program ▶

