

Southwest Harbor becomes first MDI town to ban plastic bags

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Bonnie Norwood casts her ballot Tuesday evening at the Southwest Harbor special town meeting. Islander photo by Sarah Hinckley

SOUTHWEST HARBOR — Voters here made their town the first on Mount Desert Island to ban single-use plastic bags and polystyrene food containers Tuesday at a special town meeting.

Once the voting was done and the results announced, three of the four former Pemetic Elementary School students who were instrumental in getting the ordinances passed got a standing ovation from the crowd.

“A lot of the other towns on the island said that if Southwest Harbor passed this, they would, too,” Charlotte Partin, now a freshman at MDI High School, said to the crowd prior to the vote. “Can you imagine Acadia National Park plastic free?”

Results of the two votes were very similar with 75 agreeing to an ordinance banning the single-use plastic bags and four against. Those supporting an ordinance banning polystyrene to-go containers, including the sale of Styrofoam plates and coffee cups, numbered 73 in favor and four opposed.

It was a standing room only crowd at the Southwest Harbor Fire Station where voters placed colored tabs in a box to determine the outcome. There were three warrant articles before the voters, including one regarding funding for renovation of the pump station on Long Pond (see related story). All passed by a large margin.

The plastic bag ordinance provides that “no Store ... shall provide or sell a Single-Use Carryout Bag to a customer at a checkout stand, cash register, point-of-sale or other point of departure for the purpose of transporting any goods or merchandise out of the establishment.” Stores may make a reusable or paper bag available either free or for a fee.

Voters in Blue Hill approved a similar local ban in April.

Partin and three of her classmates initiated their project last school year as students at Pemetic with teacher Bonnie Norwood. They have campaigned against the use of plastic bags by businesses on Mount Desert Island by making presentations at town meeting, libraries and in front of Boards of Selectmen. They also met with business owners to get a sense of how businesses would be affected by a ban.

One man in the crowd spoke prior to the vote commenting on how the presentation at Southwest Harbor Public Library by the girls had shifted his consumer behavior.

“After seeing the presentation, the first thing I did when I got home was I broke out four cloth bags to use from now on,” he said.

There were a few questions from the crowd regarding what reusable bags are okay to use, how the ordinance will be enforced and how to dispose of plastic bags properly.

Town Manager Justin VanDongen explained that he has been named enforcer for the ordinances but he won’t be chasing people around town giving out tickets.

“These ordinances are meant as an education tool to begin with,” said VanDongen, adding that the onus is on business owners to change their behavior first.

“I support the work they have done,” Selectman Kristin Hutchins said to town meeting attendees. “They’ve set an example for us all. I appreciate the way they have handled it civically.”

After passage of the two ordinances and overwhelming thanks and congratulations on their work, the three students said they now want to focus on passing the same ordinances in the other towns on the island.

For one of them, participating in the civic process and creating change at the local level had a clear effect.

‘It was amazing,” said Partin.