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Council to consider plastic bag ban

By Ray Lamont Staff Writer

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Ken Yuszkus/Staff photo Waitress Torrie Asaro uses plastic bags and styrofoam for a takeout order at George's of Gloucester. 9/8/17

Ken Yuszkus

Whenever a customer at George's of Gloucester can't finish his or her breakfast or lunch and wants to take the rest home, a server will place the leftovers in a plastic foam box, then put the box in a thin plastic bag for the diner to carry.

Now, a push by City Councilor Melissa Cox and others may make those containers a thing of the past, and George's proprietor Dean Salah acknowledges any such move will send his costs for "to-go" containers soaring from about \$20 for a case of Styrofoam-like containers to \$50 a case for a harder plastic carryout package.

Yet Salah says he sees the move away from polystyrene containers as an inevitable "no-brainer" from an environmental standpoint, and while he questions aspects of a plastic bag ban, he says he would be able to absorb the post-Styrofoam costs if that's the way residents and city officials want to go.

"I think it's probably a necessary thing to do," he says, adding he would not look to immediately pass on added costs to customers at the Washington Street shop -- which

includes Cox, a weekend regular. "I wouldn't knee-jerk it, and I don't think I would be affected as much as some strictly takeout places," Salah says. "It wouldn't be a life-or-death thing for us."

The two proposals -- one calling for a ban on the thin plastic bags commonly distributed by supermarkets, pharmacies and other stores, the other a ban on polystyrene cups and other containers used to package food on site -- will face a public hearing before the City Council at its 7 p.m. meeting Tuesday night at City Hall.

The orders have already drawn a split verdict within the council, with the Ordinance and Administration Subcommittee of Chairman Steve LeBlanc, Jamie O'Hara and Sean Nolan backing the ban on the polystyrene or Styrofoam but urging the full council to reject the plastic bag proposal. Both of those votes came last month after versions of the order had languished before the panel for nearly two years.

Cox said the measures, which do not specify effective dates, will still need some tweaking, even if they gain wide support. She has said she would expect both to take effect in January 2019 if approved. She also said the newest versions of the orders are more effective than earlier variations.

The initial call for a plastic bag ban, for example, would have only affected stores covering more than 2,500 square feet. The newer proposal on the table Tuesday night applies to all.

"I don't like to do things halfway," said Cox, who is Ward 2 councilor but is seeking a citywide at-large post in November's elections. "It doesn't make sense to allow some (to use the bags) and to exclude others. This, in my mind, is an important issue, and going halfway isn't good enough."

While a ban on polystyrene has more support, the idea of banning plastic bags continues to draw questions -- including from Mayor Sefatia Romeo Theken, who suggested that the bags at least remain available, in part because they're lighter and their handles are more practical for elderly and disabled shoppers to carry.

"I'm not taking any stand," the mayor said. "I just wish that, if you're going to come up with a policy, make sure the bags are at least available. I'd rather not see a yes-or-no choice. I'd rather see a compromise, and see us work together to find a solution -- maybe start small, with just the grocery stores and see what the impact is."

At least one local grocery store, however, is already ahead of the game.

Peter Sauchuk, director of the Market Basket at Gloucester Crossing, said his store has already cut back on the use of plastic bags, using boxes and selling recyclable bags for 10 cents apiece.

"We know it's going to happen sooner or later, and it is happening all over (the region)," Sauchuk added. "As a company, we've been trying to prepare for it by getting people to use boxes, reusable bags and adapting to it."

"If anything, (a plastic bag ban) would save us money," Sauchuk added. "Plastic bags are a huge expense for our company." He said Market Basket is also using more hard plastic clamshell containers -- not polystyrene -- for prepared meals and other such items.

The two proposed bans have drawn support from groups like the Essex-based nonprofit Seaside Sustainability Inc., Seaside's executive director, Eric Magers, is a member of Gloucester's Clean City Commission and a former Manchester Essex Regional High School teacher whose students helped in the 2013 push for a plastic bag ban approved by voters in Manchester.

Some businesses and business groups continue to have questions.

Deo Braga, who owns and operates the Azorean and Italiano restaurants and eight Cape Ann Dunkin' Donuts franchises, has said a ban on polystyrene -- used in Dunkin' Donuts' coffee cups, especially -- would affect his businesses "big time." He also said he and Dunkin' Donuts recognize changes in packaging materials "is going to happen at some point."

"We have not taken a position," said Peter Webber, senior vice president of the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce. "It's hard to know, because we have information from organizations like the Sierra Club, then we have data from associations like plastics manufacturers. It's hard to get purely objective data about what impact it would have (on businesses) and what it would mean."

For his part, Salah said he questions any plastic bag ban that would mean the bags would "go away" for good.

"Plastic bags are easier to carry," he said. "They probably need to go away, and I understand the (environmental) impact, but I think a lot of people are going to miss them, and they might not be thinking about that yet."