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Rockport businesses gear up for fewer plastics

By Michael Cronin Times Staff Sep 21, 2018

ROCKPORT — Starting March 1, businesses in town will be banned from handing out plastic straws and thin-film bags.

Some are already preparing as others ponder what to do with what they have in hand.

Rockport voted to ban plastic straws and thin-film bags, starting March 1, at Monday's Town Meeting, and businesses are already preparing for the change.

Kathleen Cahill, of Katie's Gift Shop at 3 Mt. Pleasant St., said she supports banning plastics, predicting that "it was just a matter of time" before it came into law. But she doesn't want to throw out the bags she already has.

"I made my latest (plastic bag) order last summer," she explained. "The smaller ones will get me through spring. The larger ones will last through another year."

She still has questions about the implementation of the ban.

“My biggest concern is that six months is a short time,” Cahill said.

The ban's effective date wasn't originally in the proposed article. Selectwoman Denise Donnelly, one of the forces behind getting the ban on the fall Town Meeting warrant, said this oversight was due to the number of details in the provision that needed to be ironed out. The March 1 date was announced minutes before Town Meeting was asked to vote on it.

Still, Donnelly believes it is an appropriate effective date. It will provide adequate time for business owners to prepare for the ban, she said.

Also, she “didn’t want to have the ban pass over the whole spring season,” the start of tourist season.

Donnelly said she's sympathetic to Rockport's small business owners, but “no matter where you put the line in the sand, there's always going to be a time that's not good for someone.”

Eric Magers, executive director of Seaside Sustainability and a member of the Gloucester Clean City Commission, echoed Donnelly's sentiments.

“There will always be a business affected by change no matter what you do,” he said. “I’m pro-business and pro-sustainability, but the global use of plastics is a disaster for the environment.”

Magers heard similar concerns as he worked to pass Manchester's plastics ban in 2013 and Gloucester's plastic ban in 2017, which will go into effect Jan. 1.

Other business owners are aware of the ban's repercussions on their bottom lines, but are willing to make the changes.

“I am all for the use of paper bags,” said Mickey Gkoikas, owner of Bearskin Neck Bistro, at 32 Bearskin Neck. “Straws are going to be a bit of a problem for us, but it's just a change we'll need to consider.”

Deo Braga, owner of eight Dunkin' Donuts shops on Cape Ann, including the one in Rockport, is aware of the changes he has to make. His Gloucester restaurant, Trio's, has already taken steps to conform to Gloucester's upcoming ban, such as changing from plastic bags to paper.

"It's going to be more costly, but it is what it is. We have to do our part," said Braga. At Dunkin' Donuts, "we have plastic bags for people who carry doughnuts out, and we'll now have to use paper."

In February, the Dunkin' Donuts corporation announced plans to remove all polystyrene foam cups from its stores by 2020. There has been no word on removing plastic straws.

Some local businesses have already shifted to more environmentally-friendly products. This spring, the Bean and Leaf Café, at 12 Bearksin Neck, switched over to compostable cups, straws, utensils, and to-go containers and bags.

"Going environmentally-friendly is a cost to the business owner, but it's a choice we've been willing to make," said owner Jed Coonely.

Recently, the café had to temporarily shift back to plastic straws.

"The vendors where we buy paper straws from say there's a back order because people are becoming more aware of the need to convert," Coonely said. "We're still waiting on our order from them."

Efforts to give businesses more details about the ban will begin this weekend. Members of the Rockport Student Green Team will be handing out brochures to local business owners regarding the ban and what they can do to help reduce plastic waste.