

Statewide solution needed to reduce use of disposable bags: Doherty

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As summer approaches, a number of well-intentioned New Jersey communities are seeking to cut down on litter by curtailing the use of disposable shopping bags. In fact, various municipalities throughout New Jersey — including the shore towns of Point Pleasant Beach, Longport, and Long Beach, and North Jersey towns such as Teaneck — have proposed disposable bag bans and fees to cut down on the plastic bags washing up on our beaches and littering our parks.

Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, the proposals vary greatly with each municipality and are proving to be costly and confusing for businesses and consumers. Depending on the town, some ordinances ban plastic bags, while others ban both paper and plastic. A number of proposals impose consumer fees on plastic bags, while others impose fees on both paper and plastic. And the various proposals have different definitions of plastic, paper, disposable, reusable and compostable. All of these varying definitions and provisions have created an unworkable patchwork of local ordinances for retailers seeking to comply.

With the food retail industry operating throughout New Jersey's 565 different municipalities, this town-by-town approach is costly, confusing and unfair to both businesses and consumers. Instead of navigating potentially hundreds of different local ordinances, businesses need a single statewide policy that doesn't unfairly burden consumers or the retail industry.

The New Jersey Food Council strongly believes that a carefully crafted statewide bag fee can benefit the environment and provide retailers with a uniform and standard policy. That is why we support S-2600/A-3267, a proposal sponsored by Sen. Teresa Ruiz, D-Essex, and Assemblywoman Valerie Huttle, D-Bergen, to reduce the use of disposable bags statewide. This legislation is based on a successful model in Montgomery County, Maryland, which reduced the overall use of disposable bags without harming the retailer or burdening the consumer.

To discourage the use of bags and reduce them from our waste stream, S-2600/A-3267 would implement a 5-cent fee on all disposable bags, both paper and plastic, of which 4 cents would be remitted to the state and dedicated to an environmental program, anti-hunger fund, food waste initiative or appropriate cause. The retailer may retain the remaining one penny to cover compliance costs. The proposal exempts customers on food assistance programs from the fee.

Finally, it is important to note that the fee will be imposed on both paper and plastic bags, which is critical to the success of the program. While many environmental advocates are more concerned about the litter potential of plastic bags, paper bags have an equally negative environmental impact, according to numerous studies from around the globe. This is because the carbon footprint of paper bags, from production to checkout counter, is far larger than that of its plastic equivalent. Papermaking requires large inputs of water, energy, chemicals, and wood resources, and produces various wastes and emissions that must be controlled or treated.

The Montgomery County model is a tremendous success, both environmentally and fiscally. One of our member food stores operates nearly 30 stores in Montgomery County and reported an estimated reduction of nearly 34 million disposable bags when compared to the average usage by their stores just outside of the county. Countywide, the program has prevented hundreds of millions of bags from entering the waste stream and raised approximately \$2.5 million per year dedicated to the County's Water Quality Protection fund.

We applaud the towns seeking to clean up their communities by limiting the use of disposable bags. However, New Jersey would best be served by a statewide and uniform approach working collaboratively with businesses, environmental groups and lawmakers. We urge Gov. Phil Murphy and the state Legislature to support S-2600/A-3267.

Linda Doherty is president & CEO of the [New Jersey Food Council](#), a trade association that represents 1,200 retail food stores, wholesalers, manufacturing and service companies.