

## **LESSONS LEARNED:**

### **RYE'S RETAIL SHOPPING BAG ORDINANCE**

On December 7, 2012, Rye's City Council voted unanimously for a retail shopping bag ordinance, banning the use of single-use, plastic shopping bags. The new law is the first of its kind in Westchester County, NY, but part of a broader national movement to eliminate unnecessary single use disposables from polluting our environment.

Members of the City of Rye's Sustainability Committee initiated the reusable bag campaign, educated the community, and advocated for the law. Although a local initiative, its success was heavily dependent on reassuring the community that the proposed legislation was not new or radical. We relied on guidance and support from the Rye community, but also from many key players outside Rye.

The Rye Sustainability Committee received much recognition for its efforts, including nationwide media coverage and a 2012 EPA Environmental Quality Award.

#### **1. GETTING STARTED – KEY PLAYERS**

##### **The Committee:**

- Ideally, a municipal sub-committee.
- Ideally, not a large number – four to five members who work well together.
- Designate a leader who will be comfortable communicating with government officials, merchants, the community, and will be able to delegate tasks. This initiative cannot be accomplished by one individual!
- Every member should be well versed on:
  - Bag facts - how single-use disposables adversely impact the environment
  - Key statistics on recycling rates (plastic; paper)
  - Opposing arguments
  - Similar legislation in other communities

##### **Guidance/Support from Outside Rye:**

- Create a network of supporters (environmental, government, civic, merchant) from other “bag communities”.
- Update them on your progress. Solicit their help and guidance when needed.
- This is a locally driven initiative, but one that impacts a wider audience. External support is critical. Individuals and organizations want to help. A courteous “cold-call” can yield positive results for gathering information and support.

#### **2. KEY GROUPS IN THE COMMUNITY**

There are three key groups that need to be educated about the proposed law and will need to provide support.

##### **Government:**

###### *Gather Information:*

- An elected official who will help support and sponsor the initiative is key.

- Meet with as many elected representatives as possible. Note their concerns.
- Meet with administrators, especially those who will be in charge of enforcement. Note their concerns.

*Take Action:*

- Address all concerns noted. Contact city officials in “bag towns” to learn how they overcame any potential obstacles.
- Update city officials periodically on your progress. Highlight how other communities have benefitted from the new law. Provide specific examples.

**Merchants/Businesses:**

*Gather Information:*

- Meet with the local chamber of commerce. Note their concerns.
- Meet with supportive merchants. Ask for their support – letters to city government pledging support; communicating their support to other merchants.

*Take Action:*

- Petition pledges of support from the merchants. Visit as many businesses as possible, asking for their support, while explaining the details of the proposed ordinance.
- Begin with businesses that are supportive. They can help spread a positive message and assist in advocacy.
- Contact businesses in “bag towns”. Some questions to ask:
  - General reaction to the ordinance?
  - Did you oppose the ordinance?
  - Has your business suffered financially as a result of the ordinance?
  - Any customer complaints?
  - Aware of any other merchant complaints?
  - Alternatives to plastic?
  - Anything the government could've done better to ease the transition?
- Summarize the interview results and distribute summary to local merchants, particularly those who will be most affected by the ordinance.

**The Community:**

*Awareness:*

- Organize a screening of the documentary, “Bag It”, preferably with discussion panel afterwards. Gather email addresses of all attendees.
- Spread the word about plastic litter and how the ordinance will help solve this enormous environmental problem.
- Solicit help from environmental and civic organizations.

*Take Action:*

- Send group and personal emails encouraging residents and merchants to write letters of support. Provide examples, but encourage people to write their own. A personal letter/email to the mayor carries far more weight than a form letter.

### **3. PRESENTATION FOR PUBLIC HEARING**

#### **Prior to the Hearing:**

It is critical to have a large, supportive group present at the hearing. Ask the following groups of people to attend, and ask them to write letters/emails:

- Residents
- Students
- Merchants from Rye and from “bag towns”
- City officials from other communities
- Environmental organizations – local and beyond
- Elected officials – county/state

#### **Presentation:**

- Review other hearing presentations
- General format should include:
  - Background information on bag facts; poor recycling rates
  - Fact that single-use disposables are economically and environmentally costly
  - Photos of plastic bag litter in your community and beyond
  - Best practices: what other communities have done and their success
  - Stats on local merchant support – which categories (ideally, food/retail) support the ordinance
  - The committee’s public awareness initiatives
  - Fact that enforcement issues are negligible (ie, the new law will not create extra work for city staff)

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