

## **Interview Questions for Champions of Bag Bans in MA towns/cities**

1. Can you explain the steps that you took to achieve the success of having a plastic bag ban passed in your community?

A key step was canvassing the local small businesses and figuring out how a plastic bag ban would impact them. It turned out that it would not impact them very much. It's really the larger retailers, supermarkets and chain pharmacies that are the big generators of the thin, plastic bags. We also reached out to the Newton Needham Chamber of Commerce. Establishing relationships with all stakeholders is a component in order to be successful with a plastic bag ban. We built community support through our local environmental group Green Newton who helped generate letters, gave testimony and put information on their web site. We learned from the Town of Brookline's experiences as well, which had passed a bag ban a year before. I had done a lot of research on plastic bag bans and fees and even took a webinar on plastic bag and film management. Based on the research and the experiences of other communities we were able to answer the questions as to why we were taking this approach and why this step was important from a sustainability viewpoint.

2. How did the specifics of your community shape your approach?

Newton is made up of 13 distinct villages, each with local small businesses that were part of the fabric of the neighborhood. The City Council is very sensitive to the concerns of their local small businesses. Based on our discussions and feedback from canvassing select village centers we realized that the small businesses are not the large generators of the targeted bags so we simply allowed an exemption for businesses under 3,500 sq ft.

3. Did the city council or board of selectmen ask for a non-binding referendum?  
No.
4. How did you gain community support for the ban? (For example, did you set up an information booth in the town/city to educate citizens about the issue, and the benefits of a ban)

Letters in the Tab (local paper), information on Green Newton website, tables at the Farmer Market and Harvest Fair, list Serves and responding to letters sent to Board of Aldermen.

5. Did you ask any community groups to co-sponsor the bill? If so, please Provide the names of the community groups.

Green Newton and the League of Women Voters-Newton gave testimony and sent letters of support. The Sierra Club of MA also gave testimony.

6. Did you speak with the individual store managers of large retail corporations in your community, who you knew would be most affected by the ban?

We spoke with store managers of some of the retail chains, including CVS, Walgreens, Wegman's, Marshall's, Michael's, TJ Max and Shaw's. We got some good data on the astronomical amount of plastic bags these retailers use every week. The Wegman's Manager at Chestnut Hill, estimated the store used 480k bags/month! (keep in mind this is one of their smallest stores). Other retail stores reported using between 5000 and 20,000 bags a week.

Wegman's said they would support a fee but not a ban. A manager at CVS said he didn't like people telling him what to do. None of the larger chain retailers would give up plastic voluntarily.

7. If so, how did you go about starting the conversation in a manner that avoided hostility?

I explained that the City is concerned about the large number of non-biodegradable, plastic bags littering our community and getting into waterways and that we were looking at ways to phase them out. Also, that the City does not recycle them and they jam the sorting equipment at the recycling facilities. We asked them how a ban would impact their store and would they be willing to educate their shoppers and encourage re-usable bag use. Most did acknowledge that the bags were a problem in the environment.

8. What was the most common objection you received from:
  - a. Businesses? Expense
  - b. Citizens? Inconvenience.
  - c. Elected officials, and city staff members? Concern about increase costs for small business owners.

This is government overreach. Interferes with consumer choice. This will increase costs for businesses.

9. How big was your network/team?

We canvassed in teams of 2-3. We had a working group made up of 5 people, including a rep from the executive office, the office economic development and the Board of Aldermen.

10. What forms of social media, and visuals did you use during your campaign?  
Did not use social media specifically for Newton campaign.

11. Did you have a hash tag for the campaign? No

12. Did you find the use of social media to be helpful? Why/Why not?

We concentrated on letters to Board of Alderman (BOA) and direct outreach.

13. Did you find that visually displaying the impact of plastic bag pollution was effective?

Yes, to some degree. We had pictures in a power point presentation for the BOA.

14. Did you have a budget for your campaign? If so, please provide the estimated budget.

15.

No budget. The Mayor and the Executive Dept did not support a ban.

16. Did the ordinance get passed the first time it was put to vote?

YES! 22 ayes, 0 nays and 2 absent.

17. What was the margin of the vote?

The vote was unanimous; 22 ayes, 0 nays and 2 absent.

18. What hardships did you face in implementing the ban?

No big hardships. It just took time to do all the education and outreach and listen to testimony. The canvassing took time and effort but was well worth it.

19. How did citizens react after the ban was passed?

The majority of residents supported the effort. There was almost no negative reaction. I got one phone call from a senior living in assisted living that she was inconvenienced by it. The sky did not fall. Most stores immediately complied. One local grocer asked for an additional 6 months to comply.

20. How long were stores given to phase out their plastic bags? In other words, when was the ban passed and when did you set it to go into effect?

Six months with an additional 6 months if they needed it to use up inventory.

21. Did you ask stores to post signs reminding people of the date that the ban would go into effect? Or did you send out a town/city phone message reminding citizens?

We suggested it would be a good idea for stores to post a sign or put out a sandwich board but most did not. We posted information on the City website.

22. Did you base the verbiage of your community's ban after that of another's? If so, which one? We used Brookline's language as a template. We increased the bag thickness to 3 mils (instead of 2.25 mils) because stores in Brookline started to offer free plastic bags that just made the minimum requirement, undermining the effectiveness of the ordinance.

23. What is your most important piece of advice for other concerned citizens who want to pass bans in their communities?

Include a comprehensive definition of for a reusable check-out bag to avoid retailers coming up with pseudo-re-unusable bag that meets bare minimum requirements of thickness.

Here is the definition from the Town of Wellesley:

*a sewn bag with stitched handles that is specifically designed for multiple reuse and that (1) can carry 25 pounds over a distance of 300 feet; (2) is machine washable; and, (3) is either (a) made of natural fibers (such as cotton or linen); or (b) made of durable, non-toxic plastic other than polyethylene or polyvinyl chloride that is generally considered a food-grade material that is more than 4 mils thick.*

Include a fee for paper bags if plastic bags are banned, or a fee on all single use point of sale bags both plastic and paper.

24. Is there any part of the ordinance or by-law that you wish you could change or re-phrase? If so, which part and how would you like to re-phrase it now?

I have docketed an item to revise the definition of a re-usable bag (see above definition).

Add a fee to all bags, paper or plastic (if not prohibited). No free bags.

25. Roughly how long did the entire process of passing the ban take?

About a year and a half. This included research, coalition building, canvassing local businesses, public comment and discussions with my city council colleagues.