

The stated Working Session of the Board of Commissioners of the Township of Abington was held on Thursday, November 9, 2023 via webinar and in-person at the Township Administration Building, Abington, PA, with President Hecker presiding.

CALL TO ORDER: 8:17 p.m.

PRESENT: Commissioners BRODSKY, ROTHMAN, DiPLACIDO, VAUGHN, BROWNE, WINEGRAD, HENRY, ZAPPONE, CARSWELL, SPIEGELMAN, SCHREIBER, BOWMAN, VAHEY, HECKER
Excused: Commissioner BOLE

Also Present: Township Manager Manfredi
Township Solicitor Clarke

CONSIDER APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Vice President Vahey made a MOTION, seconded by Commissioner Bowman to approve the minutes from the Working Session of October 12, 2023.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: None.

NEW BUSINESS:

Presentation on Single-Use Plastics & Expanded Polystyrene Products Ordinance – Faran Savitz, Penn Environment:

Mr. Faran Savitz said he is the Zero Waste Advocate with Penn Environment, which is a statewide environmental nonprofit that believes all Pennsylvanians deserve clean air, water, and a safe and livable climate. He works with municipalities throughout Pennsylvania on ways to reduce waste and tackle single-use plastics. Plastics such as plastic bags, water bottles, cups, utensils, etc., are used once and thrown away and that waste goes to a landfill, incinerator or littered directly into our environment causing harm to our health, wildlife, waterways, parks, open space, and communities.

Every year, Americans generate 35 million tons of plastic waste and less than 6% of it gets recycled, and some studies suggest that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish. Plastic also clogs storm drains, and as we see more storms and flooding, the effect becomes more dire. The Philadelphia Water Department estimates that single use plastics can double the cost of dealing with stormwater infrastructure, and PennDOT estimates they spend millions of dollars every year cleaning up roadside litter. Also, plastics directly fuel carbon pollution causing climate change issues.

Plastics does not biodegrade in our environment, instead it breaks into tiny pieces known as microplastics causing pollution everywhere. We consume these microplastics that carry hazardous chemicals, and the World Wildlife Fund estimates that every week, we ingest 5 grams of microplastics, which is the weight of a credit card or single-use plastic causing health issues.

The best thing to do is to stop it at its source and get rid of plastic bags, polystyrene containers, and plastic straws, which are included in the proposed ordinance. 24 policies have been passed or came into effect including in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and when they all become effective, they could eliminate 4,800 tons of plastic every year.

We recommend banning single use plastic bags with a \$0.15 fee for other bags given out by retailers and that fee will help cover costs from switching from plastic to paper. Also recommended is banning polystyrene foam containers although plastic utensils would only be available upon request.

Ms. Karin McGarry-Rosen, Vice Chair of the EAC, said the proposed ordinance is to eliminate plastic bags, plastic straws, and stirrers as well as polystyrene. A fee of \$0.15 would be imposed by retailers to purchase paper bags and charging for paper bags encourages you to bring your own reusable bag. Enforcement of the ordinance would begin in the spring of 2024. A survey of 627 residents and 25 non-Abington residents showed that 92% have reusable bags, 53% use them, and 36% use them if they remember to bring them, and if a nominal fee was placed on bags, 71% would bring their reusable bags.

The process, education, implementation, and enforcement recommendations were presented.

President Hecker asked for any comments from Commissioners.

Commissioner Browne said one of his constituents expressed concern about the economic impact on consumers from a lower socioeconomic standpoint for those who cannot afford the paper bag charge or purchasing their own reusable bags. He suggested partnering with retailers to incentivize having a bag-share system, which will be key to mitigating any impact. Also, concerns were expressed about the carbon impact of lower quality bags. He asked about the sustainability of canvas bags and the cost; best demonstrative practices; and recommended local retailers who will be selling the bags.

Mr. Savitz replied that definitions in the model and proposed ordinance require quality reusable bags that will last for many years, which are the best for the environment. There will be time for retailers to post signs of upcoming changes so the public can be prepared and get the bags they need.

Commissioner Schreiber said she is also concerned about the environment and the health of animals. She asked about a damaged cloth bag that could not be reused and was thrown out in a plastic bag be worse for the environment, and what about dry cleaning bags?

Mr. Savitz replied if the reusable bag was used for a significant amount of time, then the environmental impact was less. Cloth bags can be washed, and proper upkeep is recommended, and dry-cleaning bags have been exempted from ordinances due to difficulty of alternatives or operation of the business.

Commissioner Zappone said he is 70 years old, and he has been eating, drinking, and breathing plastic for 70 years and he is still sitting here tonight. Also, did the Board of Commissioners draft this ordinance because he was not involved with it, and who will enforce it? Staff from Township's departments are "strapped" as there are many priorities that need to be done, so personally, he is not "buying it."

Commissioner Henry also questioned who will be enforcing the ordinance, and how can we facilitate this smoothly for small businesses while keeping costs down for them.

Mr. Savitz said his recommendation for enforcement is during annual or biannual inspections of retail businesses for other code enforcement purposes or health inspections, plastic bags could be added to the checklist making sure the owners are following the ordinance. Another aspect is citizen enforcement where they can flag it for the Township so staff can work with the business owner to be in compliance. Also, he suggested posting on the Township's website along with a copy of the ordinance.

Commissioner Vaughn expressed concern about the inconvenience, and we just went through a pandemic, so getting rid of single-use plastic silverware would be another concern.

Ms. Rosen replied utensils are not included in the proposed ordinance. It only includes single-use plastic bags, plastic straws and stirrers, and polystyrene.

President Hecker clarified that the purpose tonight was to introduce the concept and discuss it to see what next steps the Board would like to take.

Vice President Vahey commended the work of the EAC as it is a great benefit having volunteers help us do our job, and he thanked them for taking a stand in making a positive difference, so keep up the great work.

Commissioner Carswell said the next time she visits her parents in Colorado in 2024, that entire state will have a ban in place, and if an entire state can do it as well as the two biggest cities in Pennsylvania, she does not understand why Abington could not, so she is very supportive of it.

Commissioner Bowman said this would be a short-term pain for a long-term gain. It is unfortunate going to Acme and not being able to get a bag, but you learn quickly, so he supports it.

Commissioner Spiegelman commended Ms. Rosen for her work, and he supports it as well. Feedback from residents who have been asking for it are thrilled to hear it is being considered; however, a resident reached out in opposition citing there are greater concerns, and they use plastic bags for kitty litter and pet waste, so now they will have to buy other products instead.

Mr. Savitz replied plastic bags used for pet waste are usually only reused once and there are many other sustainable options.

President Hecker asked for any public comment.

Adele Kubel, resident, expressed concern about blight at Raymour & Flanigan, and she asked about self-closing dumpsters.

Joe Rooney, resident, commented that he did not hear about the benefits of using plastics such as health, convenience, and energy-savings.

Lora Lehmann, resident, thanked the EAC for their work, and she asked about voting on this item.

President Hecker replied no formal votes are taken during working sessions.

Cakky Evans, former member of the EAC, commented that the responses from the survey indicated that if this were mandated, it would more likely be followed.

President Hecker said the Board will take this under advisement and consider the next steps.

ADJOURNMENT: 9:22 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Vile, Minutes Secretary