



Plastic Bag Ban FAQs



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FAQs with Answers

1. When are retailers required to stop providing plastic single-use carryout bags to customers?

May 1, 2017

2. What plastic bags are prohibited?

Those considered “single-use” and “carryout” are prohibited. This includes all plastic bags less than 2.25 mils (0.00225 inches) thick provided at checkout or point-of-sale. Those not allowed are the typical plastic bags with handles constructed of thin plastic (less than 2.25 mils thick). Bags constructed of durable plastic (equal to or thicker than 2.25 mils) are considered reusable and are allowed.

3. Are there any differences between the County and Town's Ordinances?

The ordinances have the same restrictions on single-use carryout bags.

4. Can retailers provide paper bags?

Retailers may provide customers, upon their request, large paper bags made of at least 40% postconsumer recycled paper. An eight-pound capacity or smaller paper bag must contain a minimum of 20% postconsumer recycled paper.

5. What stores are affected?

All retail establishments are subject to the new requirements, including grocery stores, department stores, hardware stores, pharmacies, liquor stores, restaurants, convenience stores, and other retail stores or vendors located in San Juan County.

6. Are small retail businesses exempt?

No, all County and Town retail businesses must meet the requirements of this ordinance.

7. Can retailers provide “reusable” plastic bags?

Yes, reusable bags are made out of durable materials specifically designed and manufactured for multiple re-use. Reusable plastic bags are at least 2.25 mils thick. They may be provided free or charged for at the store’s discretion.



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8. Can retailers provide plastic bags for meat, produce, and bulk foods?

Yes, plastic bags that are used inside stores for bulk foods and other items, for meats and produce, unwrapped bakery goods, flowers and potted plants, prescription medications and personal care products, and other similar items will still be allowed. Only “single-use” plastic bags used for “carryout” are prohibited.

9. Are retailers required to provide reusable plastic or single-use paper bags?

No, retailers may choose to provide either or both. If they provide plastic bags, they must be at least 2.25 mils thick to be considered “reusable.”

10. Can restaurants provide single-use plastic bags to their customers?

No, restaurants must follow the same requirements as other retailers.

11. Do the requirements prohibit retailers from selling plastic bags such as garbage bags and pet waste bags?

No, the requirements only apply to bags provided to customers at check out to carry away purchased items. Bags sold in packages containing multiple bags are not prohibited.

12. Is there an exemption for clothing stores?

Clothing stores must follow the same requirements as other retailers. Clothing stores cannot provide plastic bags at checkout that are less than 2.25 mils thick. Plastic bags constructed of thicker plastic can be provided. They may be provided free or charged for at the store’s discretion.

13. Can retailers provide plastic bags made of compostable materials?

No, not if they are less than 2.25 mils thick. The science on compostable plastic bags is not consistent. Allowing their use at this time does not ensure that our goals to reduce the many impacts of plastic bags would be met. Compostable bags also are unlikely to be an attractive option to retailers, as they are typically more expensive than regular plastic or paper bags.

14. Can retailers provide small paper bags at check out for easily damaged items, such as birthday cards, small hardware or glass items?

Yes, retailers may provide small paper bags composed of 20% postconsumer recycled paper for small items such as gifts, books, nails, for the examples noted above, and more. They may be provided free or charged for at the store’s discretion.



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15. Will there be a “grace period” for retailers to comply?

The County and Town ordinances were adopted October 25, 2016 and February 16, 2017 allowing several months for affected retailers to plan for the transition. The County Manager or Town Mayor may exempt a retail establishment from the requirements of the ordinance for up to a one-year period beyond the effective date of the ordinance (May 1, 2017), upon a written application by the retail establishment showing that the conditions of the ordinance would cause undue hardship.

16. What are the penalties for not complying with these new requirements?

Any violation of the ordinance is a Class I civil infraction and will be processed according to RCW Chapter 7.80 (County) and FHMC Chapter 1.18 (Town).

17. Why did the County and Town ban lightweight plastic carryout bags but allow heavy-weight, thicker ones?

The thicker, stronger plastic bags – those equal to or more than 2.25 mils thick – are reusable and tend to actually be reused more often than the lightweight plastic bags. They also have special uses for which paper is not a good option or not readily available; for example, very large bags for bedding and other bulky household items. Banning lightweight single-use plastic bags is considered a great next step (i.e., ban on polystyrene food service containers in 2010) in the right direction toward reducing the impacts of plastics on our environment.

18. San Juan County and the Town of Friday Harbor’s ordinances are very prescriptive about the recycled content in paper bags. How will this be enforced?

We are focusing our initial efforts on introducing these new requirements and helping local retailers comply with it.

19. Is there a requirement for the heavy duty plastic bags to have recycled content?

No, plastic bags that are allowed are not required to have recycled content, though the County and Town encourages the use of recycled content products whenever possible.

20. Are retailers allowed to use up existing stocks of plastic bags after May 1, 2017?

The ordinances were adopted on October 25, 2016 (County) and February 16, 2017 (Town), allowing several months for affected retailers to plan for the transition. We are focusing our initial efforts on educating retailers and customers on the new requirements. We encourage businesses to use up leftover stock as



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quickly as possible. If a business has difficulty, they can contact the County Manager or Town Mayor and request an exemption from the requirements of the ordinance for up to a one-year period beyond the effective date of the ordinance (May 1, 2017). The request must be in writing and show that the conditions of the ordinance would cause undue hardship to the business.

21. Are grocers' deli counters exempt from the ordinance?

Yes, prepared on-site foods such as roasted chicken and soups can be placed in protective plastic bags at the deli counter as needed to prevent leaks or spills.

22. What about bakery goods?

Bags of any kind may be used for individual bakery goods, loaves of bread and other pastries. Bags used inside stores to package bulk items are not prohibited by the ordinance.

23. What about prescription medications and personal care products?

Bags of any kind may be used for prescription medications and personal care products.

24. Are dry cleaning bags exempt?

Yes, they are exempt along with newspaper bags, door-hanger bags and bags sold in packages containing multiple bags for uses such as garbage, pet waste or yard waste.

25. What is the plan for informing retailers?

Information is posted on the County and Town websites, and outreach to the local news media, via social media and by other means will reach retailers, their employees and customers.

26. What is the purpose or end result of this legislation?

The fundamental goal is to reduce the use of throw-away plastic products, particularly lightweight plastic bags, which are a litter problem and escape into our waterways and oceans where they are harmful to animals and may enter the food chain as they degrade into smaller and smaller – but still plastic – pieces. Paper is organic and does not present similar problems. But reducing waste means cutting down on the use of paper bags, too. That's why the County and Town urge all retailers to encourage their customers to shop with reusable bags.



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27. What about bags that are almost 2.25 mils thick?

First-year efforts to introduce the new requirements will focus on business and customer education to help everyone meet the requirements of the ordinance. Over time, should a question arise, retailers should be prepared to show that the plastic bags they are using are 2.25 mils thick or greater. It might be a good idea for retailers to ask their bag suppliers to include the thickness of their bags on invoices.

28. Are there any restrictions on stores, restaurants, or bakeries choosing to charge a fee on all bags?

No, there are no requirements. This decision is up to the business.