



Local Solutions to Local Pollution

A Survey of Municipal Officials on
Attitudes Toward Single-Use Plastics



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Toward Single-Use Plastics



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Single-use Plastics Survey Results	6
Survey Question 1: Concern for Plastic Pollution	7
Survey Question 2: Types of Single-use Plastics	8
Survey Question 3: Constituent Concerns	9
Survey Question 4: Past Consideration of a Local Ordinance	10
Survey Question 5: Future Interest	11
Survey Question 6: Interest in Supporting State Legislation to Address Plastics Pollution	12
Survey Question 7: Opposition to Preemption	13
Appendix A: The Survey	14
Appendix B: Additional Responses	16
Notes	18

Executive Summary

Plastic pollution has quickly become a global environmental and public health threat, being met with growing public concern here in Pennsylvania, across the U.S. and around the planet.

All told, Americans generate over 35 million tons of plastic waste every year, 90% of which is landfilled or incinerated.¹ In fact, the US throws out enough plastic every 16 hours to fill the Dallas Cowboys stadium, and that amount is increasing.²

And this is a problem. Incinerating plastic waste leads to air pollution and toxic byproducts; landfilling can cause water pollution; and litter is clogging our oceans, rivers, streams, communities, and open spaces. Moreover, there's growing data that litter and plastic pollution is leading to a growing amount of microplastics, which have been found in the air, water, and human organs.

A bipartisan group of state, county, and municipal elected officials across the nation has already implemented much-needed policies to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics and the ensuing pollution it creates. This includes policies such as bans on plastic bags in New York and California and per-bag checkout fees on bags in Connecticut, Washington DC, and Chicago.³

Yet instead of following in the footsteps of these other leaders, the Pennsylvania State Legislature enacted a 1-year moratorium on bans, fees, and restrictions on single-use plastics at any level of government in 2019. In the summer of 2020, the General Assembly extended the preemption, stripping local officials' ability to implement time-tested policies to tackle plastic waste for many months, and maybe years.⁴

Bans and other restrictions on single-use plastics like plastic bags or polystyrene containers have been shown to be effective courses of action for fighting plastic waste and pollution; following California's statewide plastic bag ban, the share of plastic pollution on California beaches caused by plastic bags was cut by over half, and overall, 28 million pounds less of plastic was entering the market.^{5,6} Preemption laws like in Pennsylvania prevent action from being taken to combat the growing single-use plastic crisis.

Single-use plastic items like bags and polystyrene containers pose a potent threat to our environment through litter, air pollution, and climate pollution. 60% of all seabird species have ingested plastic, with that number expected to rise to 99% by the year 2050.⁷ Studies have also estimated that by 2050 there will be more plastic in our oceans than fish.⁸

Single-use plastics also impose financial burdens on the commonwealth, its municipalities, and taxpayers:

- The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) spends over \$13 million every year cleaning up roadside litter.⁹ Plastic is the most common form of visible litter in Pennsylvania.¹⁰
- Collectively, nine of the largest cities in PA spend over \$68.5 million on litter and illegal dumping every year with \$46.7 million of that going toward litter abatement.¹¹

Pennsylvania municipalities have been working to implement solutions. In 2018, the Borough of Narberth passed a ban on plastic bags and straws, citing the costs to taxpayers and the burden on our environment.¹² In 2019, the Borough of West Chester and City of Philadelphia then passed band on plastic bags.¹³

In a survey conducted by PennEnvironment Research and Policy Center of local elected leaders and appointed municipal government officials, the overwhelming majority of responses indicated that plastic pollution is an issue and action should be taken to combat it.

- **87% of respondents were concerned with plastic pollution in their municipalities.**
- Plastic bags were the form of plastic pollution that most concerned respondents
- 80% of respondents wanted to pass or would consider passing binding legislation similar to West Chester and Philadelphia
- **90% of those surveyed were in favor of, or would consider passing, a resolution calling on the state and federal governments to take action.**
- When asked about the statewide preemption, 72% would consider taking action in opposition to the ban on bans
- Exactly half (50%) of respondents had heard from constituents about plastic pollution
- Only 28% of respondents had previously passed or considered passing legislation on this issue

By extending the preemption, the Pennsylvania Legislature is only making the problem worse. The evidence is mounting that recycling and other waste systems can't handle the sheer volume of plastic that society produces.¹⁴ Nine U.S. states have passed statewide legislation, with the most recent ban coming from Pennsylvania's neighbor, New Jersey, whose legislature overwhelmingly passed a law with bipartisan support that bans plastic bags, paper bags, polystyrene containers, and only allows for plastic straws by request.^{15,16}

In order to address the environmental crisis being caused by single-use plastics, state and local officials should implement the following policies:

- 1. The General Assembly should lift the preemption on municipal plastic ordinances.**
- 2. Local governments should implement the policies we know work to reduce plastic pollution whenever possible.**
- 3. Pennsylvania should implement statewide bans on the most insidious single-use plastics like bags and polystyrene foam containers.**
- 4. Pennsylvania should implement the Zero Waste PA legislation package that offers multiple solutions to the growing waste crisis and would transition the commonwealth away from a throwaway society.**

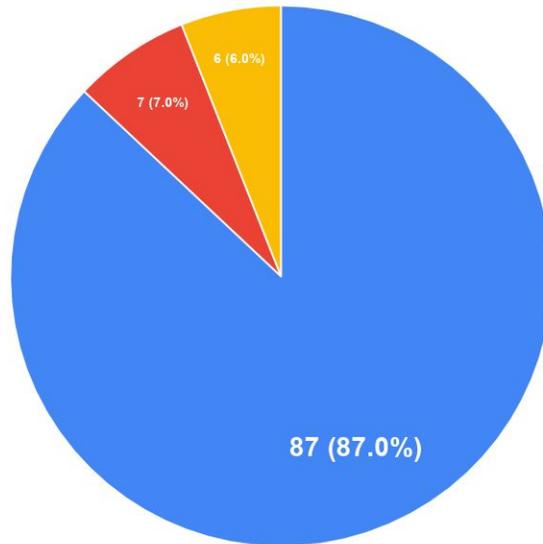
Results

Survey Question 1: Concern for Plastic Pollution

When asked about plastic pollution locally or globally, a vast majority of respondents replied that plastic pollution was a concern, with 87 replying yes, 7 no, and 7 other. A breakdown of the category “other” can be found in Addendum 1.

Are you concerned about plastics pollution in your municipality or its general effect on our global environment?

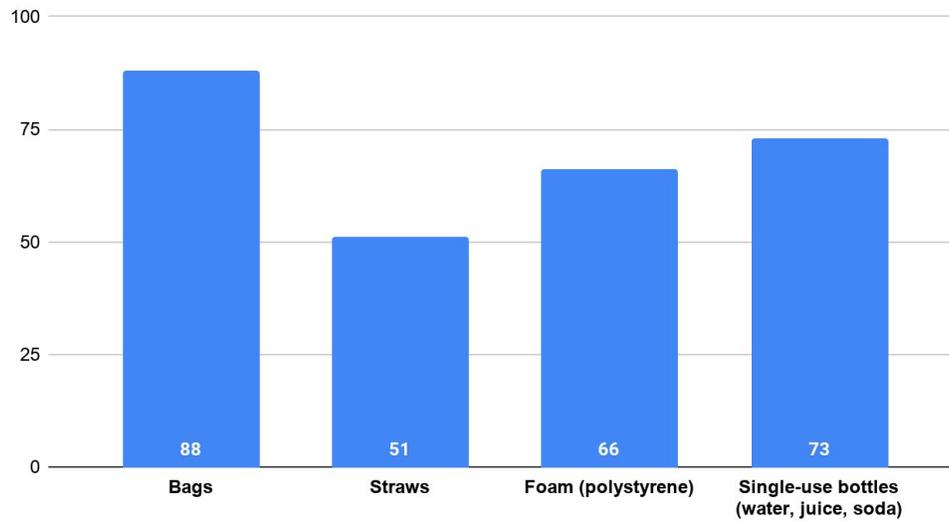
- Yes
- No
- Other



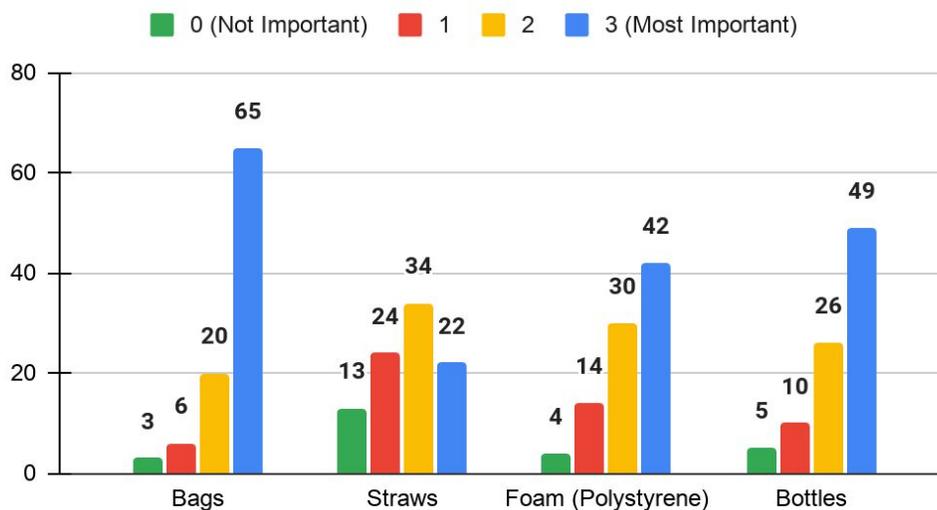
Survey Question 2: Types of Single-use Plastics

When asked which type of single-use plastic products most concerned survey takers, plastic bags and plastic beverage bottles ranked as the most concerning, at 88% and 73%, respectively. Answers for “other” are in Addendum 1. A follow-up question asked them to rank certain types of plastic on a scale of 1-4 by importance.

What types of single-use plastics are you most concerned about? (click all that apply)



Rank your areas of concern...

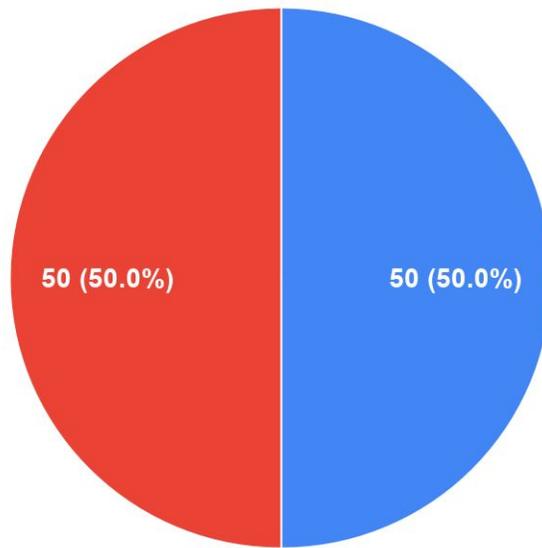


Survey Question 3: Constituent Concerns

When local officials were asked if residents have voiced concern about single use plastic pollution, 50% of survey responses said their constituents have shared concerns about the issue.

Have your constituents or others shared their concerns with you about plastic pollution?

- Yes
- No

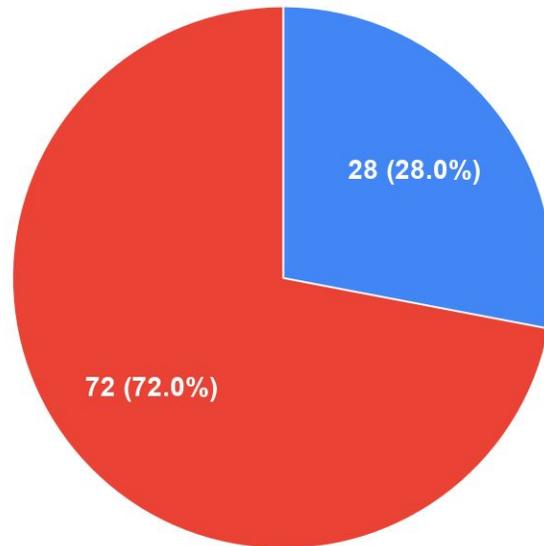


Survey Question 4: Past Consideration of a Local Ordinance

While the overwhelming majority of those surveyed, and many had constituents voice concern about these issues, only 28% had considered taking action in the form of an ordinance or resolution.

Has your township passed or considered passing a resolution or ordinance to help tackle single-use plastic pollution?

- Yes
- No

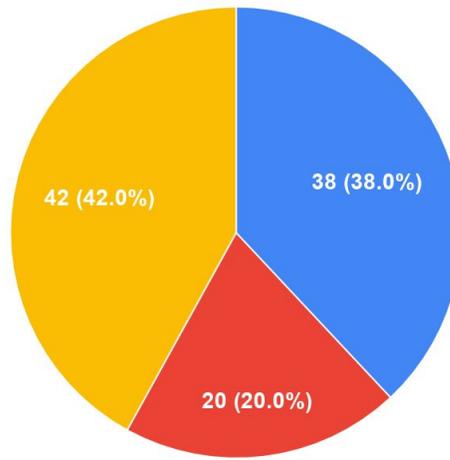


Survey Question 5: Future Interest

Despite 72% of officials responding that their municipalities had not previously considered passing an ordinance, 80% said “Yes” or “Maybe” when asked about their interest in passing a measure addressing single-use plastic pollution.¹⁷ When only looking at elected officials, the percentage not interested in binding legislation essentially stayed the same, while the percentage who responded “yes” rose from 38% to 47%.

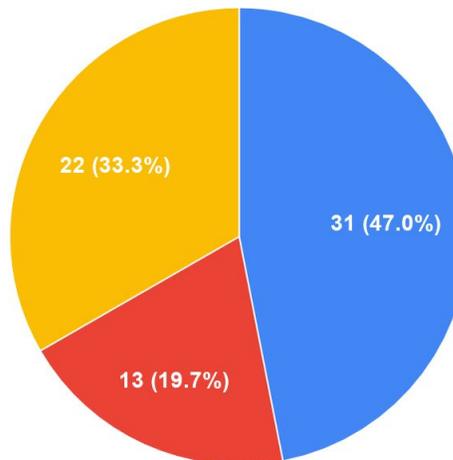
Would you be interested in your town passing an ordinance like in West Chester or Philadelphia to tackle single-use plastic pollution?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe



Would you be interested in your town passing an ordinance like in West Chester or Philadelphia to tackle single-use plastic pollution? (Elected Officials only)

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

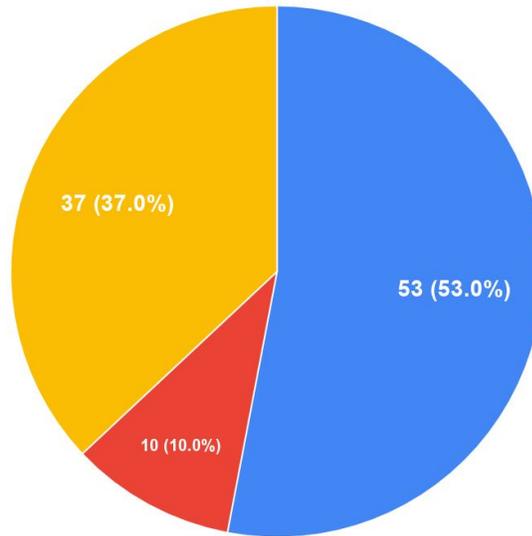


Survey Question 6: Interest in Supporting State Legislation to Address Plastics Pollution

When asked about their interest in having their municipality pass a non-binding resolution calling on state and federal officials to pass more policies to address single-use plastics pollution, 90% of officials responded “yes” or “maybe” with only 10% responding “no” to having their municipality pass such a resolution.

Would you be interested in your town passing a non-binding resolution calling on state and federal officials to pass more policy to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics and banning the most pervasive forms of single-use plastic pollution?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

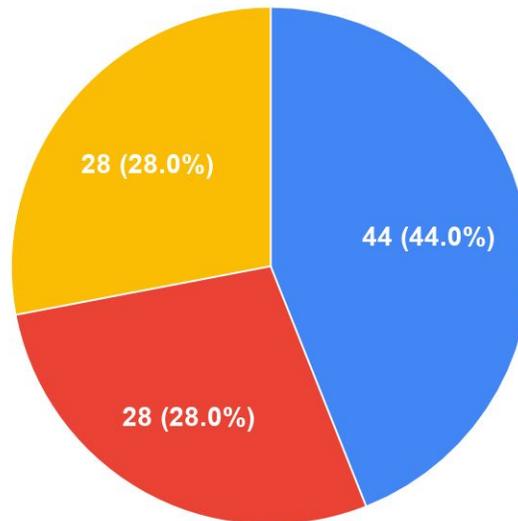


Survey Question 7: Opposition to Preemption

When asked about the statewide preemption on local plastic legislation, a plurality of respondents were in favor of writing in opposition to the General Assembly. 72% responded “yes” or “maybe” with only 28% responding “no”.¹⁸

Would you be interested in adding your name to a sign-on letter from local elected officials opposing state legislation that would prevent local officials from taking steps to rein in pollution from single-use plastics?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe



Appendix A: The Survey



Local Plastics Questionnaire

PennEnvironment is working with local officials throughout the Commonwealth to tackle the challenge of single-use plastics. We've all seen the images of single-use plastics choking wildlife, and millions of taxpayer dollars also go to unclogging plastic litter from storm drains and cleaning up the plastic trash in our communities. We want to gauge your interest in fighting this serious problem and see how PennEnvironment can be of assistance in helping with existing or future efforts to rein in this chronic pollution.

* Required

Name *

Your answer _____

Municipality *

Your answer _____

Title *

Mayor, Councilmember, Supervisor, Manager, EAC member, etc.

Your answer _____

Are you concerned about plastics pollution in your municipality or its general effect on our global environment? *

More and more townships and cities are implementing policies to tackle single-use plastic pollution in their communities and our environment. Since July 2019 West Chester, Narberth, and the city of Philadelphia have all passed legislation addressing single-use plastics.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

If other, please explain further...

Your answer _____

What types of single-use plastics are you most concerned about? (click all that apply) *

- Bags
- Straws
- Foam (polystyrene)
- Single-use bottles (water, juice, soda)
- Other: _____

Rank your areas of concern...

Different types of plastic harm communities in different ways. Which of these are most important to you?

	0 (Not important)	1	2	3 (Most Important)
Bags	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Straws	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Foam (polystyrene)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bottles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you have any comments, questions, or concerns about tackling single-use plastics in your municipality?

Your answer _____

Have your constituents or others shared their concerns with you about plastic pollution? *

- Yes
- No

If yes, what concerns are you hearing about?

Your answer _____

Has your township passed or considered passing a resolution or ordinance to help tackle single-use plastic pollution? *

- Yes
- No

If yes, please explain further...

Your answer _____

Would you be interested in your town passing an ordinance like in West Chester or Philadelphia to tackle single-use plastic pollution? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do you have any comments, questions, or concerns about single-use plastics legislation in your municipality?

Your answer _____

Would you be interested in your town passing a non-binding resolution calling on state and federal officials to pass more policy to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics and banning the most pervasive forms of single-use plastic pollution? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do you have any comments, questions, or concerns about single-use plastics resolutions in your municipality?

Your answer _____

Would you like a PennEnvironment representative to give a presentation to you and other elected officials in your municipality about the threats posed by single-use plastic pollution, and policies that we're promoting to tackle this pollution? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do you have any comments, questions, or concerns about a PennEnvironment plastics presentation?

Your answer _____

Would you be interested in adding your name to a sign-on letter from local elected officials opposing state legislation that would prevent local officials from taking steps to rein in pollution from single-use plastics? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do you have any comments, questions, or concerns about statewide preemption?

Your answer _____

Would you be interested in attending a one-day summit with other local elected officials from around Pennsylvania to learn about and share ideas on how to reduce plastic pollution in our communities and statewide? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Appendix B: Additional Responses

Survey Question 1 “other”

Response 1	Not sure of the unintended consequences.
Response 2	A response would have to be reviewed with the governing body
Response 3	In our township no Globally yes
Response 4	This is the typical knee-jerk reaction to an emotional topic that is blown out of proportion by the media.
Response 5	Concerned about all pollution
Response 6	My family & I use & promote cloth & glassware use
Response 7	This is not an item my Board has discussed

Survey Question 2 “other”

Response 1	Plastic utensils and takeout packaging
Response 2	Silverware
Response 3	Styrofoam insulation from construction
Response 4	All plastics are a threat
Response 5	Packing materials
Response 6	Micro Plastics in the environment
Response 7	Packaging

Response 8	Plastic based clothing in washing machines
Response 9	Disposable razors
Response 10	All
Response 11	The quantity of trash/waste and food composting etc.
Response 12	Any plastic not easily recycled (i.e. other than #1 and #2)
Response 13	All single use waste
Response 14	Bags...Plastic bags are everywhere still
Response 15	Take-out containers
Response 16	Single use take out containers
Response 17	All that are out there
Response 18	Plastic wrapping for Amazon and FedEx packages
Response 19	Packaging in general, microplastics

Notes

1. US EPA Office of Land and emergency Management, “[Advancing Sustainable Materials Management: 2017 Fact Sheet](#)” United States Environmental Protection Agency, November 2019
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3. National Conference of State Legislatures, “[State Plastic Bag Legislation](#)” NCSL, November 2020
4. Pennsylvania General Assembly, “[FISCAL CODE - OMNIBUS AMENDMENTS: Act of May 29, 2020, P.L. 158, No. 23](#)” May 2020
5. LA Times Editorial Board, “[Editorial: It’s been a year since California banned single-use plastic bags. The world didn’t end](#)” Los Angeles Times, November 2017
6. Christian Britscghi, “[California Plastic Bag Bans Spur 120 Percent Increase in Sales of Thicker Plastic Garbage Bags](#),” Reason, April 2016
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9. PennDOT, “[Enforcing Litter Laws](#)” Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, 2020
10. Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful, “[SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS](#)” from Litter in Pennsylvania: Results from the 2019 Pennsylvania Litter Research Study, 2019
11. Burns & McDonnell, “[THE COST OF LITTER & ILLEGAL DUMPING IN PENNSYLVANIA: A STUDY OF NINE CITIES ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH](#)” Submitted to Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful, January 2020
12. Borough of Narberth, “[Chapter 388 Plastic Regulations](#)” from Borough of Narberth PA Code Part II: General Legislation
13. MediaNews Group, “[West Chester officials vote to ban single-use plastic bags and straws](#)” Pennsylvania Daily Local News, July 19, 2019
14. Cody Marshall and Karen Bandhauer, “[The heavy toll of contamination](#)” Recycling Today April 19, 2017, Laura Sullivan, “[How Big Oil Misled The Public Into Believing Plastic Would Be Recycled](#)” Morning Edition from National Public Radio, September 11, 2020
15. National Conference of State Legislatures, “[State Plastic Bag Legislation](#)” NCSL, November 2020
16. The Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, “[P.L. 2020, CHAPTER 117, approved November 4, 2020, Senate, No. 864 \(Fourth Reprint\)](#)” November 2020
17. See Survey Question 4: Past Consideration of a Local Ordinance
18. Survey responses were taken before the General Assembly extended the preemption in June 2020