

WESTCHESTER COUNTY BOARD OF LEGISLATORS

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & ENERGY

MINUTES: May 24, 2010

MEMBERS: Chair: Harckham; Legislators: Abinanti, Kaplowitz, Maisano, Myers, Rogowsky, Testa.

IN ATTENDANCE: STAFF: C. Crane, W. Wild; GUESTS: K. Delgado (CEO), D. Power (WCDEF); M. Wallach, M. Dolan (CCE); P. Brodhagen (FIA); E. Chace-Marino (Stop & Shop); J. Ryan (A&P); T. Urtz (Shop Rite); A. Jaffe Holmes (GNC/GEF); S. Goodwin (TEAC); S. Chang, C. Kyzivat (WP Econeighbors); B. Betancourt (ACC) [list of other attendees on file]

Committee on Environment & Energy called to order at 3:10 pm.

Item(s) Discussed: Plastic Bags Recycling and Reduction

Chair Harckham opened the meeting with briefly updating committee legislators on a recent discussion with commissioners of the New York Public Service Commission regarding electric utility right-of-way vegetation management, as well as a potential Committee of Whole discussion on county water district ultraviolet disinfection project.

Chair Harckham then opened discussion on the subject topic, stating that the meeting was for informative purposes only at this time and thanking Leg. Myers for requesting committee consideration. He noted that the county's recently enacted law requiring plastic bags collection was likely pre-empted by subsequent state law. Citizens Campaign for the Environment (CCE) representatives Matt Wallach and Maureen Dolan Murphy conducted a presentation to the Committee on environmental impacts associated with plastic bags and responses in other areas to reduce the use of plastic bags. To promote higher recycling rates of plastic bags, CCE encouraged the Committee to consider legislation that imposes a five cent surcharge on each plastic bag or disposable bag (e.g, paper).

Leg. Maisano clarified that not all stores presently offer a credit for customers that bring in reusable bags, thus there would be some additional cost impacts on consumers if the suggested surcharge is imposed. Leg. Rogowsky inquired on the scope of the problem in Westchester County, especially because most of the garbage is incinerated. Mr. Wallach replied that, in his personal experience, plastic bag pollution

is prevalent in Westchester County based on observations of bags along highways and in the Bronx River. Leg. Myers stated that her interest in this subject largely originates with her experience on the county flood action task force and noting the contribution of plastic bags to flooding problems. She suggested that funds that accumulate from a proposed bag surcharge could be used to help fund flood mitigation projects.

Ms. Brodhagen, Food Industry Alliance, and supermarket industry representatives then addressed the Committee. Ms. Brodhagen noted at the outset that plastic bags are a cost to supermarkets, thus prompting supermarkets to reduce plastic bag use. Each of the supermarkets in attendance offer an incentive to customers that bring reusable bags (e.g., credit on bill for each bag). She noted that the supermarkets collect many types of plastic material in their collection efforts (e.g., dry cleaning material), which will subsequently be recycled along with plastic bags. The stores are training workers to load more materials in each bag, and less plastic is being used in each bag (thinner bags). The supermarket representatives then described their experiences with plastic bag usage and recycling.

Leg. Maisano stated that, while the stores in attendance are conducting recycling efforts and incentives, other large stores may not be and questioned how the recycling rate can be increased. He commented that better public education should begin immediately. Quoting a trade publication article, Leg. Myers said that approximately 13% of plastic bags are recycled. Leg. Rogowsky said he has not often seen signage or collection bins in the stores he has frequented.

Several public attendees provided comment to the Committee. Ms. Kyzivat described instances where plastic bag recycling is not occurring and could be improved. Chair Harckham closed the discussion by thanking participants and noting that discussion would occur at a future committee meeting.

Chair Harckham closed discussion, thanking attendees and noting that committee consideration on this subject would continue. Upon the motion of Leg. Maisano, seconded by Leg. Abinanti, the Committee voted to adjourn (all in favor). The meeting ended at approximately 4:30 p.m.

[audio recording of the meeting is on file]