

Plastic bag ban: Will Phil Murphy get involved in NJ?

Russ Zimmer
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A prospective ban on plastic grocery bags — one that would assess a 5-cent per bag charge on shoppers — could represent an early test on just how deep new Gov. Phil Murphy's commitment is to environmental causes.

Environmentalists in New Jersey are hopeful that a new administration and legislative leadership will eliminate plastic bags — which can become [a particularly insidious form of pollution in the ocean](#) — from supermarkets, gas stations and corner stores.

But first, somebody has to convince the skeptical people of New Jersey to rally behind the cause.

"The governor has to lead on this," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. "I think if he waits for a bill to come through the (legislative) process he may not get a bill he likes. It's important for the governor or his office to be actively involved."

The Governor's Office declined to comment for this story, but Murphy's election was lauded by environmentalists who for years felt ignored by former Governor Chris Christie's Administration.

"New Jersey once was a national model for protecting the environment and growing an economy fueled by innovation and ideas. ... We can once again be the state that leads the nation in progressive policies and puts common sense and our residents first in line," Murphy said during his inaugural address on January 16. "We can, and will, stand for the right things."

The equivalent of one garbage truck worth of plastic is dumped into the ocean every minute, according to a 2016 report by the World Economic Forum and Ellen MacArthur Foundation. We could live in a world with [more pounds of plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050](#).

Plastics, including single-use items like bags, straws and utensils, don't biodegrade, which means they float in the ocean, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces but never truly disappearing.

Animals, such as sea turtles, mistake plastic bags and pieces as food, which clogs up their digestive systems. This can injure or kill them. A couple different versions of a plastic bag ban have been introduced in the New Jersey Legislature since 2016.

The option with the most traction would have placed a 5-cent fee on each plastic bag used by a consumer at a chain store or retailers larger than 2,000 square feet. Seniors and shoppers using food stamps would have been excluded.

The use of plastic bags would have been discontinued on Jan. 1, 2025.

But neither the [Assembly](#) or [Senate](#) bill made it out of committee, not that the legislation would have had much of a future anyway.

"There was no shot that Governor Christie was ever going to sign anything like this," said Sandra Meola, spokeswoman for NY/NJ Baykeeper.

Senate Democrats intend to try the bill again in the new legislative session, according to a spokeswoman for the majority party.

The same entities [that opposed the ban before](#), including big business like Walmart and small shop owners, will likely continue to do so.

"Any kind of a fee on the bag or outright ban on the bag, yes, we would oppose it," said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline and C-Store Association, which represents the owners of 1,500 gas and convenience stores in the state. "We think this problem can be solved with a better job of recycling."

Will environmentalists have a champion in Murphy in the plastic bag debate?

"I would hope that he would be, given everything else that he's said he would support and do once in office," Meola said. "If he wants New Jersey to be a leader in sustainability and be a leader in clean waterways. this is a way to do that."

Murphy's embrace of policies that reflect the reality of climate change was a central part of his campaign and [there is already movement in Trenton on the state rejoining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative](#), a cap-and-trade program aimed at limiting carbon emissions.

But polling shows [attitudes toward climate change have changed in New Jersey](#), with two out of three now believing that rising sea levels represent a "very serious" threat to the Jersey Shore.

Meanwhile, the most recent gauge of the public's opinion on a plastic bag ban — a 5-year-old Fairleigh Dickinson [PublicMind poll](#) — shows that New Jersey residents were solidly against a plan to charge shoppers 5 cents for every single-use bag.

Just 39 percent of those surveyed said they'd support the passage of a law like that, while 56 percent were opposed.

"Part of it has to be an education program, you need leadership, whether it's the Legislature, the DEP (Department of Environmental Protection) commissioner, or the governor himself, you need to explain why these plastic bags need to be banned," Tittel told [the Asbury Park Press](#).

California is the only state to have prohibited plastic bags in most instances, [although all Hawaii counties have their own individual bans](#), according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

A few towns in New Jersey, including Long Beach Township, have successfully passed local laws that have either forbidden merchants from offering plastic bags or forced them to charge for their use.

So while he's "a little more optimistic" with Murphy charting the course, Surfrider regional manager John Weber says his focus remains on working with all interested parties.

"We could get a statewide bill on (plastic bags), but we should continue to work on municipalities, on the local level," he said. "Statewide bag legislation does not have a good track record."

Russ Zimmer: 732-557-5748, razimmer@app.com, [@russzimmer](https://twitter.com/russzimmer)