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McDonald's foam ban applauded

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WINSTED — When McDonald's Corp. announced yesterday it will phase out its plastic sandwich boxes, the victory was sweet for Winsted residents who had lobbied to enact a town ordinance that regulates the use of foam plastic in town.

"I couldn't be happier," Selectman David Cappabianca, a staunch proponent of the foam ban ordinance said yesterday. "It shows you what perseverance does too."

McDonald's restaurant on South Main Street in Winsted is probably the town's biggest user of polystyrene packaging.

"The (Board of Selectmen) and the citizens of Winsted can certainly take some credit," community lawyer Charlene LaVoie said. "The pressure that McDonald's relented to was grass-roots pressure."

The Board of Selectmen last month adopted an ordinance that requires businesses to prove they are recycling 75 percent of the polystyrene by the third year of the ordinance.

The original ordinance, drafted by former community lawyer Ellen K. Thomas, banned polystyrene. However, the state superseded the local ordinance when it passed a law that prohibited banning polystyrene on the local level. Charlene LaVoie, the current community lawyer, rewrote the ordinance for selectmen, allowing officials to regulate the use of polystyrene, while banning the use and sale of polyvinyl chloride in town.

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Foam ban well-received

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LaVoie was elated by McDonald's plans. "It's just reflective of the growing knowledge that this material is not good for the environment," LaVoie said. "It's good that a corporation that size can evaluate the data and come through with a decision like this."

Kim Hennig of McDonald's regional office in Windsor said McDonald's restaurants across the country plan to eliminate the "clam shell" packages within 60 days.

Big Macs and other sandwiches will be packaged in a paper-based wrap, she said. The restaurant has not eliminated all its polystyrene and will continue its recycling program for foam coffee cups and containers that hold salads and breakfast meals, she said. The company will continue to look for alternative, environmentally safe products to replace those items, she said.

Eliminating the foam packages will reduce the restaurant's polystyrene waste by 75 percent, she said.

An official at the company's Oak Brook, Ill., headquarters said McDonald's was responding to the public. "Although some scientific studies indicate that foam packaging is environmentally sound, our customers just don't feel good about it," McDonald Corp. President Edward Rensi said yesterday.

Since August, McDonald's has worked with the non-profit Environmental Defense Fund to devise a phase-out of the foam containers.

Environmentalists object to the production of the plastic because it not only contributes to the growing shortage of landfill space but also is made with chemicals that harm the atmosphere's protective ozone layer.

Hennig was not eager to credit small towns like Winsted that enact foam bans for pressuring McDonald's into abandoning the containers.

"I think that with Winsted in your backyard you get a distorted perspective," she said. Other towns that looked at banning polystyrene rejected it, she said. "At this point in time the only towns (that ban polystyrene) are New Haven and Hamden."

The state law does allow towns to regulate the use of polystyrene through recycling. In fact, businesses that may be worried about recycling can blame the state, LaVoie said. In its legislation, the state mandated that towns monitor recycling of polystyrene, instead of banning it.

In June Barkhamsted adopted an ordinance banning polystyrene, even though the ordinance was contrary to state legislation.

Amanda Bazzano, a student at Northwestern Regional School who led the charge in Barkhamsted was ecstatic about McDonald's announcement. "I think it's great," she said.

Associated Press reports were used in this story.