

Talking Trash Column

August 20, 2021

By Alan Robinson

Wednesday September 1st marks the start of a new day in earth resources stewardship in Falmouth. No longer will non-carbonated, unflavored drinking water in single-use plastic bottles in sizes smaller than one gallon be sold in Falmouth. Similar bans will go into effect that day in five other Cape towns.

The ban has come about as a result of a petitioner's article for a bylaw approved by Town Meeting in September 2020.

No doubt many will celebrate the ban as one of many needed actions to reduce carbon consumption and improve the health of the of the aquatic and terrestrial environment. To many others, it will seem an inconvenience or worse.

To almost everyone – residents and visitors alike – the ban will likely be a surprise. Since just after passage of the bylaw in September until last week, the only systematic messaging about the regulation was a June email from the Falmouth Health Department to the 150 or so businesses licensed for food service or sales. There has been no messaging program directed to the general public or visitors. Last week's page 11 article in the Falmouth Enterprise may have been the first local news article since September.

Businesses and individuals learning of the upcoming ban and regulations have asked several questions, which are restated and answered below:

Is all bottled water banned? No. The following items may be sold: water in plastic containers in sizes of 1 gallon or greater; water in aluminum cans or paper containers (although paper containers are not recyclable); seltzer, sodas and other carbonated water drinks; non-carbonated flavored water.

Can cases of individual plastic water bottles that together equal or exceed 1 gallon be sold? No.

Is having and drinking from a single-use, plastic water bottle in Falmouth prohibited? No.

Can single-use, plastic water bottles be given away by a business? Yes, this was not addressed in the petitioner's article. Doing so, however, would not be in keeping with the intent of the bylaw.

Can single-use, plastic water bottles be sold in the event of a drinking water emergency (as declared by an authorized town, state or federal official)? Yes

Can single-use plastic water bottles still be included with curbside recyclables? Absolutely!

Is Town tap water safe to drink? Yes. Regular testing of Falmouth's tap water demonstrates that it meets USEPA and MADEP drinking water standards. Some consumers do not like the water's taste, but in no way is that an indication of unhealthfulness. There are several devices available to residents and businesses to remove unwanted taste. (For more information about Falmouth water, please contact the Falmouth Water Department at 508-457-2543.)

Town Administration and organizations in Falmouth can and should do more to inform the public, both before and after September 1. This includes adding information to the Town's website, including a map of the seven outdoor water stations (each with bubbler, bottle refill, dog water bowl) that have been installed in Falmouth (four more to be installed by spring 2022) and indoor water stations. The administration or public interest organizations should provide FCTV with short, creative messages and educational information. Village Associations and other civic and faith organizations might post and email this column or last week's Enterprise article to their members.

The Chamber of Commerce has indicated willingness to work with its members to identify which member businesses would be willing to provide passers-by with a free cup of water and add this information to the water station map. Last week the Falmouth Water Stewards, with the support of the Water and Beach Departments and the Beach Committee, submitted a Community Preservation Fund application for a grant to install water stations at eight Town beaches.

Falmouth may be the most populous of the towns in Massachusetts to ban single-use plastic water bottles. Adoption will be a challenge. The successful adaptations by businesses and their patrons to the bans on plastic retail shopping bags and Styrofoam food service and drink items demonstrates that we in Falmouth are capable of change. Our Falmouth school children have been using refillable water bottles for years. So can the rest of us. Should we choose, we can still purchase bottled water in one-gallon containers. We can filter water at home and at our workplaces. What better place for change to begin than Falmouth.

Mr. Robinson is chair of the Solid Waste Advisory Committee