

RTM Says Yes to: Checkout Bag Law, Replacing Ox Ridge School, Highland Farm Upgrade, DHS Track

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An ordinance restricting checkout bags at stores in town and a project costing about \$63 million to replace the Ox Ridge School building were approved Monday night by the Darien Representative Town Meeting.

The RTM also approved proposals to fund improvements at Highland Farm park (the 16-plus-acre tract of land the town bought from the Ox Ridge Riding & Racquet Club) and to accept a gift of as much as \$300,000 from the Darien Athletic Foundation to construct a path for the Darien High School cross-country track team path around the edges of the high school campus.

All of the votes cast Monday night were overwhelming majorities.

The state Legislature on June 3 passed a statewide bag ordinance, which will start taking effect on Aug. 1 if Gov. Ned Lamont signs the legislation into law. That state law allows for town ordinances that are more restrictive in using bags at checkout.

For the most part, Darien's new ordinance does just that: The law forbids use of one-use checkout bags from larger stores (over 10,000 square feet in size — in effect, only supermarkets and larger pharmacies in town will be restricted by the town ordinance on Jan. 1, 2020; the restriction would apply to smaller businesses on Jan. 1, 2021; the proposed state law would have slightly different restrictions for all stores as of Aug. 1, 2019).

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The new ordinance also calls for a 10-cent charge for reusable bags made of recycled material (businesses can charge more). The law would go into effect on Jan. 1, 2020.

The RTM also approved a \$609,000 expenditure to add some features to the town's Highland Farms park and a cross-country track to be built around the Darien High School campus. It was a busy session for the RTM, which met for just over 2 1/2 hours. All of the votes were overwhelmingly "Yes" to all of the proposals put before the town's legislative body.

The improvement project at Highland Farms includes creation of two parking lots with a total of 92 spaces, a 12-by-20-foot shed to house a riding lawn mower and a push mower, and some improvements to walking paths and minor improvements in grading the fields, the RTM was told.

The RTM also said "Yes" to one restriction in the motion to fund the Highland Farm property — authorization to approve construction of a "comfort station" (bathrooms) for the park were removed. Town Administrator Kathleen Buch told RTM members that the town had changed its plans to construct a comfort station and only temporary "porta-potties" were now planned for the site. The new restriction made no difference in the amount funded.

The RTM voted to approve a proposed gift from the Darien Athletic Foundation of up to \$300,000 to construct a cross-country running track close to the edge of the tract of land where Darien High School stands. The track would also run through the Diller Property, a small tract at the southwest corner of the DHS campus.

The project is expected to cost somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000. About 100 students are on the cross-country track teams that would use the new track, and using the track would keep them off of town roads, some of which don't have sidewalks, the RTM was told.

The high school would host runners from other area high schools in two cross-country meets a year using the new track, and those meets are relatively quiet, unlike, for instance, football games.

The track can be used by other town residents except when track meets occur or during school days when teams might practice on them. When Darien summer school classes take place at the high school, the track would also be off limits, and it will always be off limits for dogs. At any other time, the public would be welcome to walk or run on it.