

**City Council Action Item Cover Sheet**

DATE: January 9, 2019

**Agenda Item:**

Plastic Ban Discussion

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**Question Before Council:**

Discussion on plastic ban

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**Person/Group Initiating Request:**

Council

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**Item Summary/Background:**

Plastic Ban articles for review

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# 5 years after Sonoma County ban, new era of plastic bags poses a growing waste problem

**ALEXANDRIA BORDAS**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | January 5, 2019, 8:09PM | Updated 18 hours ago.



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Five years after Sonoma County and the city of Santa Rosa banned single-use plastic bags at local supermarkets and stores, the much-maligned plastic bag is making a comeback — and reviving some familiar problems.

The new breed of plastic bag, introduced a little more than two years ago, is marketed as a thicker, sturdier sack that can be reused dozens of times, and also is recyclable.

But Sonoma County's dominant waste hauler doesn't accept the bag in its recycling stream in part because they jam up its machines. Increasingly, they are ending up in the landfill — resurrecting a problem that the county's ban and the subsequent statewide prohibition on single-use plastic bags was meant to address.

The wider emergence of the new type of plastic bag — now available at grocers across the county — stems from a state law critics say is riddled with loopholes and exemptions meant to placate the powerful plastics industry.

It could reverse gains made at landfills, as well as beaches and other waterways, where environmental advocates say far less plastic bag waste has clogged the landscape following moves in 2014 by more than 100 cities and counties to ban single-use plastic bags. A statewide prohibition went into effect in 2016.

Fred Stemmler, general manager at Sonoma Marin Recology, the area's largest waste hauler, said there is still a long way to go to break the public's dependence on plastics.

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because our overall reliance on plastic products is still growing.”

Compounding the problem, waste experts say, is a decline in statewide recycling rates, which have dropped from 50 percent of all waste discarded by Californians in 2014 to 44 percent in 2016, according to the most recent report by CalRecycle, the state’s solid waste agency.

To meet the statewide recycling goal of 75 percent of waste by 2020, a mark set by outgoing Gov. Jerry Brown last month, more than half of the solid waste currently being tossed out would need to be recycled, reduced or composted, the report stated.

Separately, the state has moved to curb the use of plastic straws, with a new law starting this year that restricts restaurants from giving customers plastic straws unless they ask for one.

The setback on bags has dismayed supporters of California’s zero-waste movement, which seeks to greatly ramp up rates of recycling, reuse and compost of household and commercial waste to limit greenhouse gas emissions and preserve limited landfill capacity. Sebastopol last October became the first Sonoma County city to commit to zero waste by 2030.

Sonoma County and Santa Rosa were among the local governments that in 2014 adopted their own bans before the state acted. Consumers evolved, bringing fabric and synthetic totes or paper bags with them to the store. Merchants adapted, too, charging consumers 10 cents every time they needed a paper bag to cart their purchases home. Many also offered durable synthetic or fabric totes for sale.

In the aftermath of the state ban, however, some retailers — including Safeway and Pacific Market in Santa Rosa, among others — began stocking the new type of plastic bags at checkout stands. Each bag carries a price of at least 10 cents under state law, but stores can charge more.

The bags are exempt from the state’s single-use bag ban because they are thick enough to qualify as reusable. While retailers say they are compostable, the bags often take too long to break down to make for good green waste, said Susan Klassen, executive director of the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency, which oversees recycling and compost operations.

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must take them back to retail stores, or to independent recycling centers that accept plastic bags and film packaging. In Santa Rosa there are 39 drop-off locations, including bins at Whole Foods, Target and Safeway, among others.

But the new breed of bags are now ending up in landfills at alarming rates, Klassen said.

“A little over a year ago we realized that they are horrible for recycling machines because they gum up the mechanics. So now the only option consumers have is to take them to a drop-off location where a different agency handles them,” she said. “It is completely on the individual now.”

Stemmler’s recycling team at Recology routinely runs into issues caused by the bags, including breakdowns in their sorting machinery that leave them unable to operate for days.

“After thousands of times of plastic bags running through it will start accumulating and we have to shut the system down and cut them out,” Stemmler said.

Local solid waste experts say they have seen the environmental payoff of Sonoma County’s 2014 bag ban, in less plastic waste strewn about the landscape.

“What I find especially telling is when I talk to folks doing creek cleanups and they mention there is a noticeable lack of plastic bags that they are picking up now, which happened fairly quickly after the ban went into effect,” said Patrick Carter, a former Waste Management Agency executive director who helped lead the push for the local measure. “So in that respect it has a great effect.”

But with the wider introduction of the new bags, any progress could be short-lived, officials say.

“If people don’t make the effort to go drop these bags off at certain locations then they go to landfills and this actually doesn’t become an improvement at all,” said Leslie Lukacs, zero waste director at SCS Engineers, a leading solid waste and environmental consulting firm with offices in Sonoma County.

On the enforcement side, Carter said while he was at the helm of the Waste Management Agency most businesses took it upon themselves to meet the state’s plastic bag regulations.

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advocates for the statewide ban. The Legislature passed a bill in 2014 but the plastics industry put up a fight. Voters upheld the law two years later.

Water quality scientist Annelisa Moe, who was born and raised in Petaluma, said there has been a 70 percent reduction in plastic bags across the state since 2014.

“Over 13 billion plastic bags were found on the beaches in the state before the ban went into effect,” Moe said. “Which if you think about that, then a 70 percent reduction is huge.”

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**Karin Hitselberger**

Karin Hitselberger is a D.C.-based writer and disability advocate. Follow 

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## The Salt

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

# Why People With Disabilities Want Bans On Plastic Straws To Be More Flexible

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Transcript

July 11, 2018 • 8:02 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition

TOVE DANOVICH



MARIA GODOY



As cities and companies — including Starbucks — move to oust straws in a bid to reduce pollution, people with disabilities say they're losing access to a necessary, lifesaving tool.

*Thn Rocn Khosit Rath Phachr Sukh /EyeEm via Getty Images*

It was a hot day at the zoo when Jordan Carlson's son, who has motor-planning delays, got thirsty. "We went to the snack bar and found out they had a 'no straw' policy," Carlson says. "It was a hot day and he couldn't drink."

Their only option was to leave the park and look for a business that sold drinks with a straw. Without one, her son can't drink beverages. At home they use reusable straws, and she tries to keep some on hand when they leave the house, but "I'm human and sometimes I forget," Carlson explains. People with disabilities have to be much more conscious of what businesses and communities offer, Carlson says.

On social media, many people are ecstatic about the crush of cities and businesses pledging to ban plastic straws once and for all. Ever since a video showing a sea turtle with a straw stuck up its nose went viral, campaigns like #StopSucking for a strawless ocean have gained considerable traction. Seattle this month implemented a citywide ban on plastic straws, Starbucks announced on Monday that it will phase out the use of plastic straws by 2020, and many other municipalities and businesses are likely to follow suit. As one Twitter user posted, "My waiter asked 'Now, do we want straws OR do we want to save the turtles?' and honestly we all deserve that environmental guilt trip."

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But for many people with disabilities, going without plastic straws isn't a question of how much they care about dolphins or sea turtles; it can be a matter of life or death.



#### THE SALT

Last Straw For Plastic Straws? Cities, Restaurants Move To Toss These Sippers

There are many alternatives to plastic straws — paper, biodegradable plastics and even reusable straws made from metal or silicone. But paper straws and similar biodegradable options often fall apart too quickly or are easy for people with limited jaw control to bite through. Silicone straws are often not flexible — one of the most important features for people with mobility challenges. Reusable straws need to be washed, which not all people with disabilities can do easily. And metal straws, which conduct heat and cold in addition to being hard and inflexible, can pose a safety risk.

"Disabled people have to find ways to navigate through the world because they know it was not made for us," says Lei Wiley-Mydske, an autism activist who has autism herself. "If someone says, 'This does not work for me,' it's because they've tried everything else."

"Also, what if you decide on the spur of the moment to go have a drink with friends after work but forgot your reusable straw that day?" adds Lawrence Carter-Long, communications director for the national Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund. "[That] doesn't leave a lot of room for spontaneity — something nondisabled folks get to largely take for granted."

On social media, many people have responded to claims that people with disabilities need plastic straws by asking what people did before plastic straws were invented. "They aspirated liquid in their lungs, developed pneumonia and died," says Shaun Bickley, co-chair of the Seattle Commission for People with DisAbilities, a volunteer organization that's supposed to advise the city council or agencies on disabilities issues.

#### THE SALT

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How much plastic straw and stirrer pollution is out there? Scientific estimates vary. One report suggests they make up more than 7 percent of the plastics found in the U.S. by piece. By comparison, the same report found plastic bottle caps alone accounted for nearly 17 percent. But straws make up a much smaller percentage of pollution by weight.

Environmentalists have latched on to a figure stating that Americans use over 500 million plastic straws every day — a number that was derived from phone calls made by a 9-year-old boy in 2011. Despite its frequent repetition, there's uncertainty over the accuracy of that figure.

In a post detailing how the plastic straw became the cause du jour for those who love the oceans, Dune Ives, executive director for the Lonely Whale Foundation, wrote, "We found plastic water bottles too endemic, plastic bags already somewhat politicized, and no viable alternative for the plastic cup in ALL markets." So they chose plastic straws, a "playful" alternative and a " 'gateway plastic' to the larger and more serious plastic pollution conversation."

Most of the plastic in the ocean does come from land, says Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist for the Natural Resources Defense Council. She notes that because plastic breaks up into smaller and smaller particles, it can be hard to tell what it used to be in some cases.

"Straws are maybe not the biggest source of either plastic pollution or disposable plastic we consume, but they're in there," Hoover says.

And for many people who want to consume less plastic, she says, straws are low-hanging fruit.

Yet in general Hoover says that she is wary of outright bans on things. "I personally think we as a country use way too many disposable water bottles. That said, there are

times when I'm caught somewhere, don't have a reusable bottle, and want the option to have water and not a sugary drink."

"The key is breaking habits," Hoover says. "Is something a habit because you truly need it or because you got used to doing it that way?"

Carter-Long says he is sympathetic to environmental concerns about plastic pollution, but any public policy aiming to reduce the use of straws needs to make accommodations for people who might need them. Ideally, he says, "each restaurant owner [would] follow their own conscience, maybe keep a stockpile of plastic straws in their storerooms for people to use who need them."

A spokesman for Seattle Public Utilities confirmed to NPR that the city's new plastic straw ban does include a waiver allowing restaurants to give disposable, flexible plastic straws to customers who need them for physical or medical reasons. But Carter-Long and Bickley say there doesn't seem to be widespread awareness of the exemption. Bickley says he asked over a dozen Seattle chain restaurants — including McDonald's and Chipotle — "if they had plastic straws available for people with allergies or need, and they told me no."

And just because an exemption is written into law doesn't mean businesses will comply, even if they know about it. "So many businesses try to get around already ignoring things with [the Americans With Disabilities Act] until someone says, 'I need a ramp or wider hallway or ramp in bathroom or Braille menu,' " says Jordan Carlson. "Sometimes you need to bring a lawsuit just to have your voice heard."

Although Bickley serves on a commission that is supposed to advise Seattle's city agencies on disability issues, he says no one consulted the group before passing the plastic straw ban.

Dianne Laurine, who lives in Seattle, has cerebral palsy, is quadriplegic and has no use of her extremities. "She is old enough to remember a time before plastic and everybody just used rubber straws," Laurine's caretaker, Bill Reeves, says on her behalf, since she has a severe speech impediment.

"They ended up being disgusting, hard to clean. The advent of plastic in the 1950s changed her life," Reeves says.

When asked what it felt like when the straw ban went into effect without consulting those with disabilities, Laurine audibly repeated one word, "Awful. Awful. Awful."

"You're putting this burden on disabled people to come up with a solution. You're not asking companies that manufacture straws to come up with a version that works for us," autism activist Wiley-Mydske says. "You won't even take the bus instead of driving your car somewhere," she says, adding, "How many of you are willing to die for the environment?"

*Tove K. Danovich is a journalist based in Portland, Ore. Maria Godoy is a senior editor with NPR and host of The Salt.*

*NPR Business Desk intern Charlotte Norsworthy contributed to this report.*

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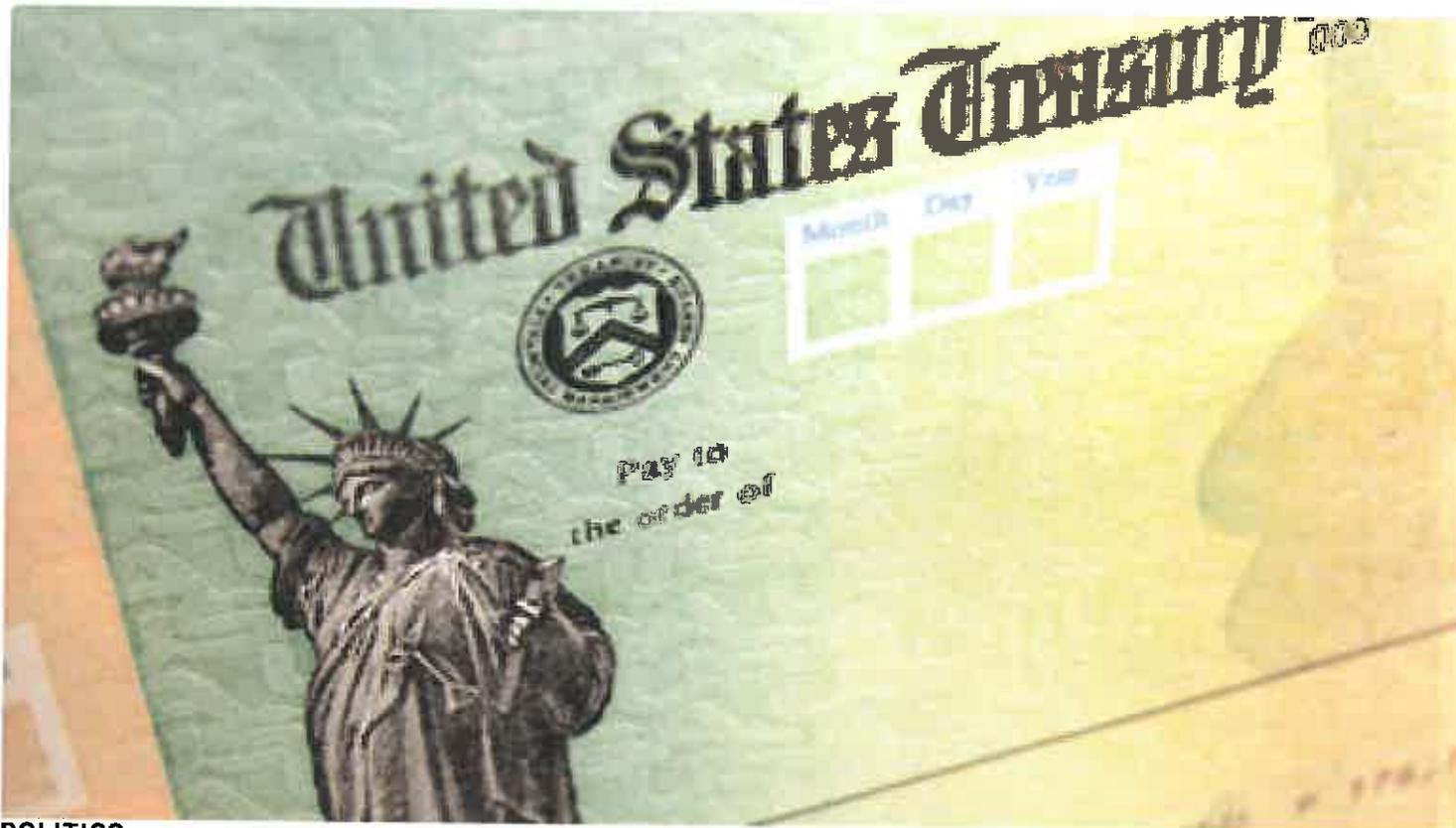
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