

Suffolk mulling plastics ban

Bills restricting foam containers, straws planned

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Suffolk restaurants could give out straws only on request and would be banned from using Styrofoam-like plastic foam containers, plates and cups under bills being introduced Wednesday in the County Legislature.

The goal, lawmakers say, would be to reduce plastic litter.

Plastic straws would be prohibited at restaurants except for customers with a disability or medical condition. Single-use straws instead would have to be made out of biodegradable material, like paper. Restaurants that break the straw law would be hit with fines starting at \$100 for a first offense.

Plastic straws and polystyrene containers litter beaches and roadways, bill sponsor Legis. Kara Hahn (D-Setauket) said.

"Plastics don't go away when it rains. They're there for hundreds of years until someone picks them up," said Hahn, the majority leader and chair of the

environment committee. "We need to reduce our use of plastics, and certainly Suffolk County should be leading the way on this."

Alternatives to plastic straws and polystyrene containers are more expensive for restaurants than the plastic alternatives, according to New York State Restaurant Association government affairs director Kevin Dugan. Plus, there's a shortage of biodegradable straws as municipalities across the country push plastic straw bans.

Still, Dugan said he expects some bans in New York to pass and the group isn't opposed to the legislation.

"We understand the need for the legislation, the environment," Dugan said. "I hope there's recognition this is another burden on restaurants, and not quite as easy as it seems."

Andrew Fasoli, a spokesman for the American Chemistry Council, defended polystyrene foam packaging. Alternative packaging is heavier and could lead to more solid waste and energy use.

"Polystyrene foam packaging and containers provide restaurant owners and consumers a safe, durable and cost-effective package," he said in a statement.

Hahn plans to introduce four

bills Wednesday that came out of a task force to reduce single-use plastics. The restaurant ban on polystyrene also would prohibit the sale of the foam peanut packaging material; another bill would prohibit future county concessionaires from distributing single-use cups and utensils made from non-biodegradable substances; and require the county to install water fountains designed to allow bottle filling at most of its facilities.

The anti-straw legislation would prevent servers from automatically putting straws on the table or asking if customers wanted them. Hahn said that would lead to restaurants needing to buy fewer straws.

"You don't remember it unless you need it," she said.

Paper straws cost about 2.5 cents each, compared with a half-cent for a plastic straw, distributors told Newsday in August.

Hahn said restaurants will be allowed to "keep a stash" of plastic straws for people with disabilities, some of whom depend on straws to drink.

The ban would not apply to fast-food restaurants and other establishments with drive-through windows, Hahn said. If it passes, it would take effect Jan. 1.

The polystyrene ban exempts items used to store uncooked eggs, raw meat, pork, fish, seafood and poultry. A ban on polystyrene would go into effect three months after it passes. It could pass in March at the earliest.

Suffolk would be the latest municipality to take on straws. Municipalities, including Malibu, California; Miami Beach, Florida; and Portland, Oregon, have partly or fully outlawed plastic stirrers, straws and other items too small to be recycled properly.

Chains such as Starbucks, McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, Marriott International and Hyatt Hotels have said they will phase out plastic straws.

Judith Enck, a former regional administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and visiting professor at Bennington

College, praised the legislation being introduced. She said plastics are getting into the ocean through litter on beaches and streets, and also rely on fossil fuels to manufacture.

Bills being introduced in Suffolk are "appropriate and smart. We desperately need them," said Enck, who was not involved in drafting the legislation. She said Suffolk legislation, if successful, could lead to state legislation.

Suffolk Republican legislators said they would consider the bills, though they wanted to see the details.

Legis. Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore), the minority leader, said he hasn't seen the legislation, but worries, "At some point we have to ask ourselves where we draw the line when it comes to banning everyday conveniences like straws."



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