

Pacifica may ban polystyrene containers and utensils

By Julia Scott San Mateo County Times

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PACIFICA — Diners at Pacifica restaurants will no longer be taking home their food in Styrofoam containers next year if Pacifica bans them for environmental purposes.

Pacifica's environmental community was pleased with a City Council decision Monday night to explore language for an ordinance that would ban restaurants and supermarkets from using all polystyrene containers, including Styrofoam, for take-out.

The City Council voted 5-0 to ask staff to study the issue as it has played out in neighboring communities such as Millbrae, which banned not just Styrofoam containers but hard plastic "clamshell" containers as well as plastic straws, forks and knives on Jan. 1.

Pacifica staff members will bring back a draft ordinance — no language has been set, so it may or may not be as all-encompassing as Millbrae's — and a timeline for phasing it in.

City Councilman Jim Vreeland said it was now practical to ask local restaurants to use take-out containers and other foodware made of biodegradable or recyclable materials, since they have become more affordable and widely used in the past couple of years.

"We did ask staff to look at ways we can reduce the impact these products are having on the environment," said Vreeland, referring to the standard Styrofoam containers. "There's a wide range of alternatives, and some of the costs of these alternatives are coming down."

Pacifica Beach Coalition Director Lynn Adams said it was "high time" for the city to consider a ban on polystyrene, which her group has been lobbying for.

"It's horrible for the wildlife and the marine life. A large proportion of the litter we collect (on beaches) is from Styrofoam. It just breaks into smaller and smaller pieces, and it doesn't go away," said Adams.

While she supports the city's first steps, she objected to giving restaurants six months to adjust to the new rules after an ordinance is passed.

Vreeland said the city would need time to get businesses on board and address their concerns, as well educate them about the alternative materials available to them.

Millbrae's restaurants have employed many of those alternatives since the ban came into effect, ordering containers or cutlery made of paper, potato starch, bagasse (sugar cane fiber pulp) and polylactic acid (corn starch).

Shelly Reider, recycling coordinator for Millbrae, said the ban did not generate any objections from local businesses, and only a few have reported spending more money than before on the new packaging materials.

"In some cases, the products cost more. In some cases not. Its' really dependent on the quantities ordered," she said.

An informal survey conducted by the Times revealed that most Pacifica restaurants still use nonrecyclable Styrofoam containers for take-out, although some are aware of their environmental impact.

"We're still using them. We have prime ribs to go, and it won't fit in the new ones they have now," said Denise Ash, assistant manager at Vallemar Station Restaurant. "Once they start making them big enough, we'll switch over."

Other North County cities have followed Millbrae's lead in recent months, or are about to. South San Francisco passed a similar set of rules in August that take effect in October, the same month that San Bruno will consider a polystyrene ban to take effect next year. This spring, the county decided to stop using nonbiodegradable containers and utensils at county-run facilities.

Nick's Restaurant in Pacifica started substituting "potato ware" containers for Styrofoam last month out of a sense of civic responsibility, according to Peter Buqeileh, the restaurant's maitre d'. But he said the new containers have unexpected benefits as well.

"It holds hot food better. It's less expensive than the wax products for take-out containers," said Buqeileh.

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Banning polystyrene

More than 28 cities and counties in California have taken steps to ban polystyrene food containers and utensils in part or in full recently, most since 2006. Some Bay Area highlights include:

Berkeley: The pioneer in 1988

Oakland: June 2006

Emeryville: March 2007

San Francisco: June 2007

Alameda (city): January 2008

Millbrae: January 2008

San Mateo County (county facilities only): April 2008

South San Francisco: Coming October 2008

Source: Staff reports, Californians Against Waste