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Styrofoam ban kicked to curb

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A bill that would have made California the first state in the U.S. to ban disposable foam food containers has been pulled from consideration by Peninsula Assemblyman Jerry Hill, who said the country's economic crisis made it bad timing for such legislation.

Legislators who were opposed to the bill expressed concerns that the bill would have an adverse impact on California businesses that manufacture the material, commonly called Styrofoam.

"I don't, nor does anyone in the Legislature, want someone to lose their job," he said. "There is no doubt it would affect manufacturing companies in this state. It would probably cause some employment problems."

Assembly Bill 1538, introduced in February, passed the house appropriations committee on May 28, but Hill had the bill pulled in June. It would have prohibited restaurants and other food vendors from using disposable containers made from what's officially called "expanded polystyrene" to encourage the use of sustainable, recyclable and biodegradable alternatives.

Hill said he introduced the bill out of environmental concerns, since Styrofoam contributes to pollution in streams, bays and oceans, and has rallied against the product as a suspected carcinogen and neurotoxin.

Environmentalists say polystyrene foam contributes to nonbiodegradable waste in landfills. Thirty-one California cities already have bans that prohibit restaurants from using disposable foam food containers, Hill said.

Locally, South San Francisco, Millbrae, San Francisco and Oakland have bans. San Mateo County passed legislation last year that prohibits polystyrene foam use in county facilities. San Bruno has a voluntary ban on expanded polystyrene food containers that is slated to become mandatory in 2010.

California would have been the first state in the nation to ban the environmentally unfriendly packaging. New York and Hawaii are considering similar bans.



At Cecilia Pizza and Italian Restaurant in South San Francisco, Mariano Aragon prepares a salad inside a recycled plastic packaging. (Juan Carlos Pometta Betancourt/Special to The Examiner)

Pacifica is also encouraging restaurants to change to recyclable and biodegradable food containers. Not everyone is eager to make the switch, however — particularly restaurant owners, who say alternatives to the foam food containers are more expensive.

Jacob Cecilia, owner of Cecilia's Pizza and Italian Restaurant in South San Francisco, noted that the containers he is now using for pastas and salads cost three times that of the foam boxes.

Cecilia said he went from spending \$18 for every 100 Styrofoam containers to \$44 for the cardboard.

“But you got to do what you got to do,” Cecilia said.

A spokesman for Hill said the bill is on hold for this year while the assemblyman works on amendments to address some of the concerns of opponents.

There will likely still be critics.

The California Chemistry Council opposes any such ban because it singles out polystyrene foam and not all other nonrecyclable materials, according to Tim Shestek, a senior director with the group. He said Hill should be looking at all types of food service containers — as well as proper alternatives — and not working “piecemeal” by just banning plastic foam.

Making the shift

Among cities that have banned disposable polystyrene food containers:

Berkeley
Millbrae
Oakland
Portland, Ore.
Santa Cruz
Santa Monica
Seattle
South San Francisco
San Francisco

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