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OPINION

Opinion: It's time for Berkeley to lead again – to save our oceans and planet

Plastic foodware is a major contributor to litter in Berkeley and across the planet. The Single Use Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance will transition Berkeley from plastics to reusable and compostable foodware.

By Sophie Hahn, Jan. 22, 2019, 9 a.m.

We've all seen the heartbreaking images of turtles, birds and other marine life engulfed in plastic debris, the Texas-sized Pacific Ocean garbage patch and beaches strewn with a tsunami of plastic bottles. Where does all that plastic come from?

It comes from us.

A major source of plastic pollution is single-use disposable foodware – better known as take-out food packaging. Across California, plastic plates, cups, straws, and other containers make up a quarter of all waste. In the Bay Area, food and beverage packaging make up more than half of our litter. Here in Berkeley, plastic waste lines our streets, storm drains and creeks. While most take-out food packaging is used for just a few minutes, it lasts hundreds of years, contaminating every level of the world's oceans and putting us all at risk.

Without a dramatic change in the products and packaging we consume, there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish by 2050. And it's not just fish and birds who are eating this toxic waste. Plastic attracts other pollutants that transfer to the fish, seafood and salt we all consume. This has to stop.

Tonight, the Berkeley City Council will consider the Single Use Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance to significantly reduce the amount of food-related plastic used and discarded in Berkeley. Developed hand-in-hand with the Ecology Center, UpStream, Rethink Disposables and other environmental organizations, the legislation sets forward the most comprehensive and far-reaching set

of measures ever proposed in the U.S. to transition from plastic to reusable foodware.

Over the next three years this legislation, authored by my office and co-sponsored by Mayor Jesse Arreguín, will progressively transition restaurants and other food vendors to the exclusive use of compostable foodware for to-go orders and reusable foodware for eating-in. We are also asking city staff to develop a city-wide reusable takeout foodware program for launch in 2022, something no other community has attempted but is essential to achieve the gold standard for Zero Waste: *reduction* and *reuse*.

In addition to the huge local and global environmental benefits of this ordinance, Berkeley also stands to benefit financially. Eliminating plastic foodware will significantly reduce the costs of maintaining the city's 400 public trash receptacles, unclogging stormwater intakes and sweeping our sidewalks and streets. We'll also save money in our composting program by reducing costly plastic contamination of compostable materials.

While each of us must change our habits to achieve these environmental and fiscal benefits, Berkeley's food vendors are our most important partners in making this transition. Successful implementation will require change for some restaurants, most of which are locally owned and operate on razor-thin margins. Luckily, many visionary establishments have already moved to 100% compostable foodware for to-go orders and reusable foodware for dining-in. Their leadership demonstrates a strong commitment to our shared

environmental values, and the feasibility of this approach.

As with all transitions, new opportunities will be created for the business sector. Compostable foodware vendors and entrepreneurs interested in taking on the challenge of a city-wide reusable to-go foodware program have already been reaching out. By 2022, I am confident we will have devised a system for reusable to-go ware city-wide. Innovators are cordially invited!

The Single Use Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance is the result of exhaustive consultation. Introduced in April of 2018 as a referral to the Zero Waste Commission, six public listening sessions were held and hundreds of written comments were received and cataloged. Restaurants were visited on-site and industry and business representatives consulted to better understand opportunities and challenges and to ensure the legislation will work for our local businesses as well as the planet.

As a result of months of outreach and consultation, we undertook a major rewrite. The needs of our disabled residents, some of whom require plastic-type straws for

beverages, are now addressed by encouraging restaurants to maintain a supply. Technical assistance and mini-grants will be offered to help businesses with one-time costs, and waivers will be available for those who make a good faith effort but are still unable to comply due to space or economic constraints.

The success of Alameda County's plastic bag ban has been phenomenal. We all thought we couldn't live without them, but it turns out that most of us – both individuals and businesses – were quickly able to adapt. Now it's time to break the habit of throw-away foodware. With this legislation, and the concerted efforts of Berkeley's forward-thinking residents and businesses, there is no doubt that we *can* make a huge difference for our community, and our planet.

The Single Use Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance is item 22 on the City Council's agenda tonight. The meeting begins at 6:00 pm at the School District Board Room, 1230 Addison Street in Berkeley.

Sophie Hahn, a city councilwoman representing District 5, is the co-sponsor of this ordinance.

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