

## San Jose council to take up banning Styrofoam at big events

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Posted: 11/08/2009 12:00:00 AM PST  
Updated: 11/08/2009 04:21:10 AM PST

Having moved earlier this fall to ban plastic and most paper grocery bags, the San Jose City Council on Tuesday will be asked to ban Styrofoam at special events on city property with more than 1,000 people.

While the plastic bag ban, if passed next year, would make San Jose the largest city in the nation to enact such a prohibition, Tuesday's issue is an opportunity for the city to play catch-up with others, such as San Francisco and Berkeley.

"It's kind of our first foray into banning Styrofoam," said Jo Zientek, deputy director for the city's integrated waste management division.

City Council members also will vote on whether to require food vendors to use a certain type of plastic cup and to allow the San Jose Conservation Corps to continue collecting plastics, glass, metal and cardboard for recycling at special events. Each year, the city pays about \$78,000 to fund the Corps' work at events.

The green initiatives should come as no surprise to vendors or event organizers at San Jose's five largest events, which have been participating in a pilot Zero Waste Events Program launched by the city's Environmental Services Department last year and continuing through 2010.

Those events are Cinco de Mayo, the San Jose Jazz Festival, the Tapestry Arts Festival, the Italian Family Festa and the American Independence Day event. The last event, however, was called off this year because of a lack of funding from sponsors and the city,

according to Fil Maresca, whose company produces the annual fireworks show at Discovery Meadow.

A separate effort to reduce the burden of city fees on organizers is being led by San Jose City Councilman Sam Liccardo and is expected to be taken up by the council in the near future.

But while some may gripe about high city fees, the push for greener events seems to be acceptable to many event organizers.

"It's been a good process. It hasn't been one of those that causes much pain or turmoil, as far as I can tell," said Chris Esparza, owner of Giant Creative Services. His company stages the Left Coast Live music festival downtown, the Spirit of Japantown festival and last month's Pumpkins in the Park, among other events.

Esparza said the process of teaching event organizers about green goals has been well-managed by city staff, whom he called "very thoughtful and measured." And the staff has been especially attuned, he said, to whether "things are too financially burdensome or complicated" for vendors and organizers.

The test will come next year, when those vendors and organizers will have to pay for their own food and beverage containers. Under the pilot program, they've received a free ride from the city, which has paid \$80,000 for all containers at the five largest events in 2008 and 2009.

"I have enjoyed the luxury of not having to buy containers," said Lauren Kates, owner of Aunt Lali's Mobile Cafe, which sells ice cream, espresso and other delicacies at events like the Jazz Festival and Tapestry Arts Festival.

While she hopes the cost of the new containers won't put a big dent in her finances, she said she supports the city's effort to protect the environment. "If it's a few cents more, it's a few cents more," said Kates. "I want to help the planet."

Zientek said city staff has determined that the recommendations are largely cost-neutral for events and should not be problematic. She cites informal event surveys that show 50 percent or more of food vendors already use alternatives to Styrofoam and that paper products are competitively priced with Styrofoam.

Critics of the Styrofoam ban, such as the Alliance of Foam Packaging Recyclers, argue that the foam is recyclable and report that nearly 70 million pounds were recycled in 2008. Zientek agreed that Styrofoam, a brand name for polystyrene, can be recycled, but not when it has food residue on it.

With the \$80,000 subsidy for vendors' food and beverage containers going away in 2010, the final year of the Zero Waste Events pilot program, the council will be asked Tuesday to vote on whether those funds could be used as seed money for a Green Events Program.

Zientek said the money could be used on goals such as recycling fats, oils and grease produced at events; using solar stages and solar equipment to generate power on-site; and even encouraging vendors to sell recyclable items and souvenirs.

And next up? The possibility of banning Styrofoam used by food vendors citywide. In April, the Palo Alto City Council approved a ban on foam takeout containers at restaurants, effective in spring. Oakland, San Francisco and Millbrae also have banned Styrofoam takeout containers.

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