

Report on Polystyrene Ordinance implementation—9/9/2016

Introduction:

The City of Cambridge polystyrene ordinance becomes effective on October 20th, 2016. The purpose of the ordinance is to reduce the use of polystyrene in food containers as polystyrene is impractical to recycle and like many other plastic products is not biodegradable. After October 20th food establishments in the City will be prohibited from dispensing food or beverages prepared on the premises in disposable containers made from polystyrene, be that foam polystyrene or oriented polystyrene. This prohibition includes straws, cups, lids and utensils and applies to school cafeterias as well as other institutional entities that serve food and beverages, to the public, prepared on site.

Outreach:

A letter advising establishments of the particulars of the ordinance was sent to approximately 500 food/beverage business in Cambridge in July 2016. Subsequent to the letter being sent, the Department of Public Works embarked on a door to door outreach program and has met with more than 300 businesses and expects to visit with the remaining business over the next couple of weeks. Public Works Department staff have also attended business association meetings in Harvard Square, Central Square, East Cambridge, and Kendall Square and have held two public forums in late-July and early-August with a dozen establishments represented as well as restaurant materials suppliers.

We've also given businesses the option of a 15-30 minute consultation with the Recycling Division at their premises to learn how to reduce waste and comply with the ordinance. At this time, just a handful of businesses have taken us up on this offer but we will continue to make this option available to people for the foreseeable future.

Restaurant Depot in Everett, MA is a major supplier for food service items for Cambridge businesses. To help these businesses, we are placing flyers at the entrance of the Restaurant Depot facility to help them choose compliant products, and, throughout the store, we're placing 3 inch x 3 inch stickers showing business owners what products are compliant. See sticker;

Finally, we have created a preferred vendor list for businesses who shop at locations other than Restaurant Depot.



Feedback from Businesses:

Not dissimilar to the BYOB ordinance, the polystyrene ordinance has met with some skepticism from some business owners. However unlike the BYOB ordinance, the polystyrene ordinance has also been met with significant resistance by many businesses, primarily because of the challenge associated with finding alternative products, the quantity of food service items that must be swapped out, and the cost associated with such.

- **Alternative Products.** Appropriate alternative products are challenging to find in the local wholesale marketplace at this time. After considerable effort we have identified alternatives to many of the typical items that are usually made from oriented polystyrene and will continue make such information available to local businesses and others that are impacted by the ordinance. Unfortunately many of the alternative products i.e. bioplastics (PLAs), that have been identified are neither recyclable nor compostable in the facilities available to the City. We send our organic material to two locations at this time; an anaerobic digester facility in Lawrence, Ma and a farm in Saugus Ma that uses a rotating drum digester/windrow operation. The bioplastic compostable products decompose at much slower rates than are acceptable at either of these facilities and thus materials are rejected.

- **Quantity of PS products.** The number of polystyrene items at a retail establishment may be substantial. Most food and beverage establishments have polystyrene items. Many of the businesses have about 3-5 polystyrene products. At least 9 stores have 10+ polystyrene items. One retailer with 4 Cambridge locations has 17 polystyrene products and a chain grocery store has 30 polystyrene products that must be swapped out for compliance. We have been informed that switching these products out is very costly, particularly for small businesses.
- **Financial Burden.** We have also heard from businesses concerning the cost of alternative products. For example, one Cambridge institution projected that 8-12 items must be replaced and will result in a \$17-20K annual increase in material costs. Our research suggests that bioplastic and polypropylene products are generally more expensive than polystyrene products.
- **Unknowns.** As is the case with the Bring Your Own Bag ordinance the Department of Public Works will continue to work with businesses and food establishments etc. to educate and assist in complying with the ordinance. Our sense is that it will be challenging initially for businesses to come into compliance for the reasons already provided. In terms of enforcement, ultimately we expect to conduct inspections and require compliance, however, we expect that this effort will also come with challenges as there are numerous products that are regularly used by retail establishments that don't indicate whether they're made of polystyrene or not i.e. Plastic straws, stirrers, spoons, forks, knives, and other small plastic items.