



'People need them': the trouble with the movement to ban plastic straws

In California and beyond, lawmakers are taking action for the environment. But advocates for people with disabilities say the bans create yet another hurdle to dining in public

Vivian Ho

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At first glance, bans on plastic straws might seem like a simple - and harmless - next step for the environmentally conscious.

Love sea turtles? No more straws. Want to save the planet? "Stop sucking."

But as cities and corporations jump on the anti-straw movement that is gaining worldwide support and celebrity backing, few have stopped to consider the unintended consequences of these well-intentioned bans.

Boba tea shops that rely on plastic straws are left scrambling to find pricier alternatives. Manufacturers of compostable straws can't keep up production to meet the demand. And people with disabilities who

cannot drink a beverage without the assistance of a straw now have to navigate yet another obstacle to dining in public.

“What has happened here is a situation that happens time and time again when it comes the disability community, and that is ‘out of sight, out of mind,’” said Lawrence Carter-Long, the director of communications at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund. “If people don’t personally need straws, they fail or neglect to realize that there are people that do.”

But even as voices of opposition begin to rise up in the public zeitgeist, local jurisdictions are still moving forward with unprecedented speed to pass broad bans.



Vivian Ho testing different straws for boba tea. Photograph: Talia Herman for the Guardian

San Francisco passed an ordinance banning single-use plastic utensils or accessories last month with a unanimous vote from the board of supervisors, following in the footsteps of Seattle, Washington; Malibu and Carmel, California; and Vancouver in Canada. New York and Berkeley are considering similar bans, while city councilors in Oakland passed a straw-upon-request ordinance similar to those that have passed in Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, Alameda, Davis, and Manhattan Beach.

Worldwide, entire countries have prohibited plastic straws, with Taiwan working to eliminate all single-use straws by 2025. The United Kingdom and the European Union are considering similar measures.

The San Francisco supervisor Katy Tang, who authored the legislation, said the purpose was not to shame straw users, but to get both consumers and sellers to reflect on the waste they create.

“If our oceans are going to be filled with more plastic than fish in a couple of generations,” she said, “isn’t that something we should think about the next time we’re reaching for that plastic straw wrapped in more plastic?”

At a recent board meeting, where she slurped boba tea out of a glass jar with a reusable metal straw, Tang pointed out that there had always been pushback against legislation furthering sustainable efforts.

“With the plastic bag ordinance, there were a lot of fears and anxiety and complaints about how we were going to comply with the ordinance, and then the composting ordinance came along and everybody was also very anxious about it smelling up our garages,” Tang said. “Now it’s such a normal part of our lives.”

But what pro-ban advocates continued to overlook was that what they considered normal in their lives was not always normal for people living with disabilities, said Alice Wong, founder and director of the Disability Visibility Project.

Wong, 44, has a progressive neuromuscular disability, and relies on a wheelchair for mobility and a ventilator to breathe. Her hands and arms lack the strength it takes to tilt a cup to her mouth. Spills are a constant concern for her.



Alice Wong: 'For a disabled person, straws are an accessibility tool.'

Photograph: Talia Herman for the Guardian

“People think, ‘It’s so easy to give this up. If I can give it up, why can’t you give it up?’” she said. “It’s something most people don’t notice, but for a disabled person, straws are an accessibility tool.”

Carter-Long described how.

“People say, ‘Why don’t you just stay at home, then? If you need a straw, why don’t you bring one?’”

But it’s never that simple. The compostable options don’t always hold up, especially in hot drinks, and can’t be used by people with severe food allergies. The reusable metal options aren’t malleable or soft enough for some with certain disabilities - Carter-Long has cerebral palsy, and one concern is being able to control his bite – and for those with limited mobility, bringing and then accessing their own utensils is just another hurdle to enjoying something commonly available to the able-bodied.

“Some people like myself don’t have people around us to help us get these things out of our bags,” Wong said.

The San Francisco ordinance has a provision that allows for businesses to provide plastic straws for people with a disability or who require them for another medical reason. Tang maintains that this provision is enough, but disability rights advocates say that the vague wording puts the onus on people with disabilities to ensure they receive equitable service.

For people with disabilities, the whole debate is emblematic of a much bigger issue that happens far too often when it comes to the disability community: the erasure of a disabled person’s experience.

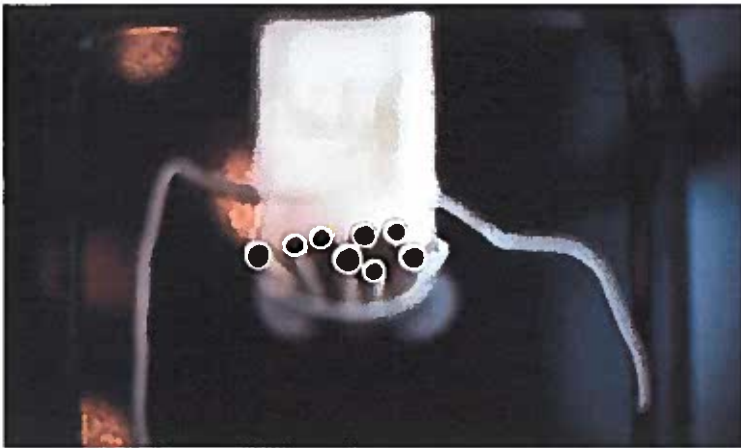
“All of this could have been avoided if they consulted the disability community from the beginning rather than as an afterthought,” Carter-Long said.

Wong added: “Environmentalists are saying, ‘Oh at this point, we are happy to talk to people. But the damage is done.’”

Milo Cress, the 17-year-old founder of the Be Straw Free project that has been largely credited for starting the anti-straw movement, has pushed since he began the project for an “offer first policy”: for businesses to offer straws to customers rather than serving them automatically. A bill seeking to make this a required statewide practice in California passed the legislature and awaits the governor’s signature.

The policy still cuts back on waste, Cress said, while allowing those who need straws to access them. “Participating restaurants have reported back to me that 50%-80% of customers choose not to take a straw when offered,” Cress told the Guardian in an email.

Cress also advocates for restaurants to provide environmentally friendly alternatives, like compostable straws. But as more and more jurisdictions pass measures, manufacturers are having trouble meeting the demand.



Buluh bamboo straws, one alternative to plastic. Photograph: Talia Herman for the Guardian

Alvin Yu, co-owner of Steep Creamery and Tea, which sells boba drinks, said the demand for compostable boba straws was so high they were on backorder with “a four or five month wait”. (And that’s not even taking into account the issue of finding compostable options strong enough to withstand the heft of the heavy, sticky tapioca pearls in the popular drinks.)

Yu was fortunate in that he saw the writing on the wall early on - he runs the boba operations for AT&T Park, home of the San Francisco Giants, which had been moving away from plastic straws for some time, and had helped the Seattle Mariners in rolling out sustainable options for the boba stands at Safeco Field.

But he is concerned with the cost, which will only get worse as the demand continues to outgrow supply. He said he had seen compostable straws retail for as much as \$2 each.

“A plastic straw for the most part is brought in from overseas and is less than penny each,” Yu said. “At wholesale, we get [compostable straws] at 20 cents each.”

Despite the disagreements, the hope on all sides - from the boba shop owners, the environmentalists, the legislators, and the disability rights advocates - is that the technology will catch up and someone will find a way to create cost-effective, durable compostable straws. Because despite the unintended consequences, the premise behind the plastic straw bans and anti-straw movement is something on which most people can agree - especially environmentally conscious Californians.

“Listen, I became a vegetarian 30 years ago for environmental reasons,” Carter-Long said. “I would much rather be standing alongside Supervisor Tang and other city legislators for an ordinance we all support than doing interviews like this.”

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California lawmakers vote to restrict use of plastic straws, keeping state in national spotlight on environment



By PATRICK MCGREEVY AUG 23, 2018 | 12:45 PM | SACRAMENTO



Plastic straws sit at the ready at a cafe in San Francisco. The state is considering barring dine-in restaurants from providing plastic straws unless they are requested by patrons. (Jeff Chiu / Associated Press)

California is poised to become the first state to restrict the distribution of plastic straws at restaurants under a bill approved Thursday by lawmakers, capturing the attention of environmentalists nationwide who hope the idea, like many with origins in the Golden State, will spread across the nation.

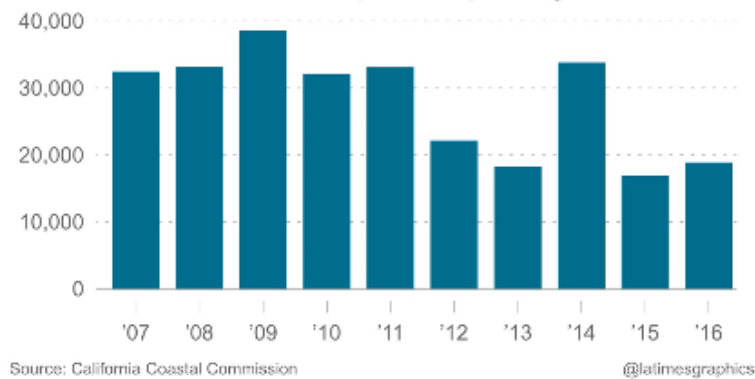
The legislation, which would prohibit full-service, dine-in restaurants from offering plastic straws to customers unless they are requested, passed on a 45-20 vote by the Assembly and now goes to Gov. Jerry Brown for his signature.

Stopping short of an outright ban, environmentalists say they expect the bill will again make the state — which represents the world's fifth largest economy — a trendsetter.

Its approval is the latest of several actions by California to reduce plastic pollution. In 2014, Brown signed into law a ban on single-use plastic bags at food markets, liquor stores and pharmacies. Voters rejected an effort by the bag industry to repeal that law two years later. In 2015, California lawmakers voted to ban the sale of personal care products that contain plastic microbeads starting in 2020.

Ban backers including the bill's author, Assemblyman Ian Calderon (D-Whittier), say oceans, rivers and other areas of the environment have been harmed by discarded plastic. Calderon noted that the California Coastal Commission has recorded roughly 835,000 straws and stirrers picked up between 1988 and 2014 during beach cleanups and other pollution reduction campaigns.

Plastic straws and stirrers picked up along the coast



(Los Angeles Times)



The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans disposed of more than 33 million tons of plastic in 2014, most of which was not recycled. Technomic, a marketing analysis firm that watches the food service industry, recently issued a study that estimated Americans use 172 million straws each day.

“Plastic pollution continues to pose a significant threat to our oceans, our waterways and our landfills,” Calderon told his colleagues Thursday. “Reducing consumer demand for plastic straws can help decrease plastic pollution.”

The measure drew opposition from Republican lawmakers, including Assemblyman Matthew Harper of Huntington Beach, who said restricting straws may add more plastic to the waste stream as businesses use straw-less lids made of plastic, and paper straws that he said can come wrapped in plastic.

“This is a feel-good movement to ban straws that actually does little to clean up the environment,” Harper said. “California needs to stop being the nanny state that ... tells restaurants how to run their businesses.”

Some environmentalists would like to see the state go further. Calderon’s bill exempts fast-food or “quick-service” restaurants where the bulk of plastic straws are provided. Blake Kopcho of the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity said the state should require all straws to be made of biodegradable material.

The bill was opposed in the Senate by Republicans, including Sen. Ted Gaines of Rocklin, who worried about the negative impact on businesses.

“I’m just questioning the need for the legislation, quite frankly,” Gaines said during floor debate. “I think the market, given time, will come up with alternatives.”

Brown generally supports environmental legislation but has not said how he will act on the straw bill.

The measure would require full-service restaurants that primarily serve food to offer plastic straws only to customers who request them. It allows restaurants to offer paper or metal straws, and permits customers to bring their own plastic straws to the restaurants.

Calderon said the plastic waste is harmful to marine animals, contaminates the human food supply and can lead to contamination of drinking water.

One study by UC Davis researchers found that 25% of the fish from markets in California and Indonesia contained plastic debris, Calderon said.

“It’s critical that we reduce the negative effects of plastic pollution,” the legislator said. “By removing the default behavior of providing straws with every drink, consumers have an opportunity to make a deliberate, small change that will lessen the harmful impacts of single-use plastic straws in our environment.”

If Brown signs the bill, California would follow the lead of cities such as Malibu, Davis, Alameda, Carmel, San Luis Obispo, Manhattan Beach, Oakland and Berkeley that adopted policies either regulating or banning plastic straws.

California’s last straw?

The state legislature is about to make California the first state to restrict the distribution of plastic straws by restaurants. Here’s where plastic straws have to be requested, and here’s where they are banned.

Available by request	Banned
Ashbury Park, N.J.	Davis, Calif.
Berkeley	Fort Meyers Beach, Fla.
Bradenton, Fla.	Malibu
British Columbia	Manhattan Beach
Huntington Beach	Miami Beach
London	San Luis Obispo
Miami	Seattle
New York	
San Diego	

Source: California Public Interest Research Group

Politically powerful groups that traditionally challenge new state regulations on businesses have refrained from opposing the bill, removing obstacles from the movement through the Legislature. Two of the most prominent, the California Restaurant Assn. and the California Chamber of Commerce, have remained on the sidelines.

“We haven’t taken a position because our members do not consider this a mandate,” said Denise Davis, a vice president for the chamber.

Even the Plastics Industry Assn., which has voiced concerns about similar proposals in the past, is not fighting Calderon’s bill.

“While we would prefer to work with policymakers to enact more comprehensive solutions to the challenges facing waste management and recycling, we do not oppose straws upon request legislation as long as it

allows customers to choose a plastic straw if they want or need one,” the group said this week in a written statement.

A legislative analysis hints at why there may be a lack of opposition, except from a few local chambers of commerce: The first and second violations would result only in warnings, while offenders could face fines of \$25 per day for subsequent violations.

The bill, with its minimal penalties, might not achieve a sizable reduction in the number of plastic straws in California — in part because it excludes fast-food restaurants, which are a primary source of the straws, according to a bill analysis from legislative staff.

“If anything, it sets the stage to make it more difficult to ban single-use plastic items,” the analysis warns, saying the bill would set a precedent for fast-food restaurants to be excluded from future bans.

Still, supporters of the restriction on straws hope it will have the same educational impact as the state’s ban on restaurants serving water unless requested during the 2015 drought, which forced many Californians to think about the need to conserve water.

The national group Defenders of Wildlife is among those urging California to take the lead on the straws issue, according to Kim Delfino, the organization’s California program director.

“We think that if California adopts this innovative approach to reducing plastic pollution, other states will see the benefits to the environment and the cost savings for businesses and follow in our footsteps,” Delfino said.

Some food and drink businesses already have moved voluntarily to limit the use of plastic straws. Starbucks Corp. said last month that it will eliminate single-use plastic straws from all of its locations within two years.

<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-plastic-straw-limits-california-20180823-story.html#>