

The Plastic Dilemma

As Recycling is not the Answer, What YOU Can DO

What do plastic bottles, plastic cups and plastic straws have in common?

Each of these items, which millions of people use daily, will outlast all of us by hundreds of years.

As noted on plasticgarbage.weebly.com, scientific studies estimate that it will take 200 years for a plastic straw to decompose. A plastic bottle? 450 years. A plastic cup 500+ years. Styrofoam? Never. These facts underscore the mounting problem that plastics are posing to the world today.

“Many countries and many states in America, are just starting to awaken to the pressing environmental impact of disposable plastics,” said Dave Kostka, Chairman of the Colts Neck Environmental Commission. “While there are millions of people who still need to be educated about this issue, we are slowly starting to see concerted actions being undertaken to address the plastic problem on a global, national, state and local level.”

The average American family uses 1500 plastic bags a year (Sciencing.com 4/2017) which translate into Colts Neck’s 3120 families using over 4.6 million plastic bags each year. When you add the use of plastic bottles, straws, wrappers, etc., we have a plastic pollution issue in our township, state and nation.

Recycling Is Not The Solution

When the idea of recycling was introduced, the public was receptive. The result, however, has not been successful.

The promise of the reuse of plastics caused an increase in plastic use. More product containers and household items were manufactured in plastic. Using a plastic item once and then discarding it increased dramatically. Many of these items, if recyclable, were not being recycled. By 2017, globally, one million single use plastic bottles were sold **per minute**, however, 91% of these bottles were **not** recycled. (Forbes 7/2017)

Then the handling of plastic waste changed. For years China imported the world’s plastic waste for recycling. In 2018 China banned the import of most plastic waste and in May 2019 Malaysia also began rejecting much of the waste being sent. (Wall Street Journal 12/19/2019). There are fewer places now to send plastic bottles, bags and clamshell containers, etc.

While recycling is a positive factor to the plastic pollution problem, the most effective solution is the REDUCTION in the amount of plastic each person or business utilizes.

Perhaps the world's greatest concern should be the impact of plastic waste upon our marine life and the resultant impact on our health.

Fish are eating plastic bags, plastic bottle caps, straws and other plastic waste. In the North Pacific, fish ingest 12,000 to 24,000 tons of plastic every year resulting in intestinal injury and death to small fish or small fish transferring the plastic up the food chain to bigger fish, which is being consumed by humans. (Ocean Plastics Pollution, biologicaldiversity.org).

It is time to make some changes.

What Can You Do

Products made from plastics are useful, beneficial to society but also can be harmful to the environment. There are, however, small lifestyle changes which can reduce the wasteful use of plastics. Here are a few tips to reduce plastic use:

1. Stop buying water in plastic bottles and start using re-usable water bottles for everyday living. This one step could have remarkable positive impacts on the environment.
2. Bring your own ceramic or reusable cup to your favorite coffee stop, fill up and skip the plastic lid. Your coffee will stay hot longer while you keep the cup and lid out of the landfill.
3. When ordering a drink advise the server "no straw".
4. Bring your own bag to all stores you shop in and say, "no bag needed," or "paper not plastic please."
5. Look for products packaged in paper, not plastic. Increasingly, detergents and other products are offered in boxes. Milk and other beverages are being offered in paper cartons, too.
6. Shop in bulk when possible, helping to reduce overall plastic waste in your kitchen. Bulk is not always a huge size. Consider buying larger yogurt containers and place a daily serving in a reusable container.
7. Rather than buying cut up fruit in plastic clamshell containers or plastic bags, buy the fruit and use your own reusable container.
8. Comply with your 2020 Township Recycling Instructions. The recycling companies for towns such as Colts Neck accept plastic items with only numbers 1 or 2 and with a pourable neck smaller than the body. Failure to comply with the requirements can result in rejection of all recyclables thus adding waste to the landfills.

What Can Local Business Do?

Businesses and customers can work together to reduce waste. Here are some tips for businesses to consider:

1. Evaluate how your business uses disposable plastics and determine if plastic is the most cost-effective product for the business needs. Are plastics really necessary?
2. Explore substitutes for plastic. Are paper bags better from a cost and environmental perspective? Are other materials available?
3. With over 500 million plastic straws used every day in the United States, consider reusable stainless steel straws, glass straws, reusable plastic straws and paper straws not thinly covered by plastic.
4. Reusable metal cutlery or plant-based cutlery can be substituted for plastic knives, forks and spoons restaurants provide.
5. Paper and other plant-based containers are alternatives to plastic take-out containers. No bag or paper bags might be a choice.
6. Reduce plastic use: If eliminating plastic or changing to metal, paper or plant-based items is not economically feasible, businesses can work to reduce the amount of plastic use. For example, use sippy lids without straws, advise customers that straws will be provided only upon request, and ask customers if they want a plastic bag instead of automatically reaching for one. The same approach can be taken for other plastic products, like forks, knives and spoons.

Businesses working together with customers can reduce the environmental detriment without reducing profits or inconveniencing customers.

These are only a few simple examples of what businesses and individuals can do to reduce our use of plastics to protect our environment. To impact the plastics pollution problem in Colts Neck, our state and nation, remember the 3 R's-Reduce, Reuse, and, if there is a market, Recycle.

Colts Neck Environmental Commission