

San Clemente restaurants shrug at plastic-foam ban

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Though San Clemente has adopted a ban on plastic-foam containers at restaurants, several local eating establishments say it's no big deal.

Many owners interviewed said they don't use expanded polystyrene, commonly known as Styrofoam, and haven't for years. Those who do use such containers didn't seem upset either. It's better for the environment, they said, so they plan to figure out an alternative and go from there.

"I'm not really surprised," said Sam Kang, a manager at A Taste of China, which uses the banned material for to-go containers. "We live by

the beach."

Restaurants such as BeachFire, Jacobi's on the Alley and Nick's San Clemente haven't used plastic-foam containers since they opened. Instead, the owners buy paper and corn-based biodegradable packaging.

"We've been open nine years and I've never served anything in Styrofoam simply because I don't think it's a responsible way to run a restaurant," said Dave Donaldson, owner of BeachFire.

Mark Jacobi of Jacobi's on the Alley doesn't even use plastic straws because of their potential effect on sea life. If you need to stir a drink, the restaurant offers wooden sticks.

San Clemente's ban doesn't include most plastics, aluminum, paper or compostable products.

When looking into the possible effects of a ban on plastic foam, the city last year sent two letters with informational packets to restaurant owners describing the possible change. No survey was conducted, but the letters encouraged business owners to share their comments about the proposal. City Hall got less than a half-dozen responses.

Jacobi, who used to be a chef at Sundried Tomato in Laguna Beach, said that when that city proposed a similar ordinance about three years ago, restaurant owners were up in arms.

"In Laguna, it was gloom and doom, but it didn't cause anybody to close. The restaurants certainly fought it," he said.

Why the shrug in San Clemente and the groans a few cities north?

It could be because the cost of alternatives has gone down while the price of plastic foam has increased slightly through some distributors.

"There are always different ideas and new products," Donaldson said. "We'll try them out and I've noticed that the products are getting better and better."

Some businesses that need to change don't know what they'll do yet. A Taste of China and Bad to the Bone BBQ are researching other materials but find them expensive. Marty Wells, owner of Bad to the Bone, said the cost may have to be passed on to consumers. His restaurant once tried a corn-based product for cups, but customers complained about it melting in car cup holders in the sun, he said.

Wells said restaurant owners who say the pennies difference between products doesn't affect them in the long run may already have the difference incorporated into their pricing, while his business does not.

"I don't like Styrofoam personally," Wells said. "But my distributor said the alternatives will be double or triple the cost."

The containers he currently uses have increased in price about 8 percent, he said.

According to a city staff report, a 12-ounce plastic-foam bowl costs 5 cents, while a sugar-cane-derived bowl costs 6 cents. For a 9-inch plastic-foam clamshell container, the cost is 10 cents, compared with 22 cents for a sugar-cane clamshell.

The city has a list of alternative distributors on its [website](#). The ordinance allows businesses to be exempt from the rule by showing the ban would cause undue hardship.

Mark Norris, owner of [Crispins](#) restaurant, said he charges a few cents if people want a to-go container. Crispins is known for its low prices, and Norris said he's able to keep it that way by unbundling costs. If you want an extra cup of coffee or an eco-friendly to-go box (which is all that's offered), it'll cost you, but you also get \$3 breakfasts and \$7 lunches.

When Newport Beach passed a similar ban in 2008, the [American Chemistry Council](#), a trade group, told city officials that bans elsewhere had little effect, as they can't stop people from littering. Last year a volunteer group collected more than 100,000 pieces of plastic foam at beaches in San Clemente, according to a city report. San Clemente's ban does not cover prepackaged food, which beachgoers often leave behind.

In 2004, San Clemente adopted an ordinance prohibiting the use of plastic-foam containers at all city facilities. The new ban takes effect July 1.

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