

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **New publication offers options for policy makers to effectively reduce single-use plastics in their communities**

(Pittsburgh, PA) This week, the Plastics Collaborative published a robust [white paper](#) containing a series of policy recommendations for Southwestern Pennsylvania communities around the issue of single-use plastics.

After a year of research that included interviewing governmental representatives and experts around the country who had experience in implementing single-use plastic reduction policies, the Policy Working Group of the Collaborative recommends three targets for policy initiatives to curb single-use plastics in the region: plastic bags, plastic straws, and polystyrene.

“We’ve developed these recommendations with a specific lens focused on the characteristics of southwestern Pennsylvania,” said Lydia Morin, Co-Chair of the Policy Working Group and Executive Director of CONNECT, one of the organizations engaged in the Collaborative. “With over 530 municipalities in our region, each community has the opportunity to explore and identify solutions that work best for their residents and businesses. These recommendations provide a starting point for policy-makers, residents, and businesses to join together on workable solutions.”

Single-use plastic refers to plastic materials such as take out containers, straws, bottles and packaging that are meant to be used once and then become waste or litter. Once thought of as the height of convenience, the issues these materials have caused globally and in Southwestern Pennsylvania are expensive and increasingly harmful to the ecosystem, animals, and ourselves. A [report](#) from the World Economic Forum estimates that by 2050 there will be more plastic in our oceans than fish (by weight).

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, nearly [36 million tons of plastic was generated in 2018 and less than 9 percent was recycled](#). The rest ends up as litter or gets sent to landfills or incinerators where it will release microplastics over time that can get carried by wind or rain into the environment.

“The recommendations for Southwestern Pennsylvania municipalities are built on research, interviews, and expertise from individuals representing government, business, and nonprofit sectors,” said Natalie Ahwesh, Policy Working Group Co-Chair and Executive Director, Humane Action Pittsburgh, another organization involved with the Collaborative. “We know that reducing

single-use plastics cannot be up to the individual alone. Effective, sound policy can help solve the problem, along with a deliberate approach to rethinking how our products are designed and manufactured, with their end of life in mind.”

The following policy recommendations are intended to both create progress, and serve as a stepping stone to further initiatives to reduce the use of single-use plastic in the region.

#### Plastic bags

- Consider a ban on thin plastic film bags with the following joint action:
  - Levy a fee on available disposable bags of at least 12 cents (study recommended 10 cents adjusted for inflation).
  - Impose guidelines on available disposable bags to address their environmental footprint. For example, require bags to be composed of a certain amount of recyclable material.
  - Work to improve infrastructure to recycle available disposable bags.
  - Address unintended consequences of plastic bag bans such as alternatives people will turn to for secondary use such as trash bags composed of even more plastics.
  - Consider and create a plan to combat the higher demand for paper and other sorts of disposable bags which will also have an impact on the environment and mitigate the increased burden on vulnerable populations.
  - Include a messaging plan to encourage habitual use of reusable bags to meet and exceed their threshold of environmental benefit.

#### Straws

- Implement a policy that bans the use of plastic straws, cutlery and utensils and makes the alternative option request only.
- Include equity and accessibility exemptions in plastic straw legislation and ensure that appropriate partners are brought to the table to discuss the policy through an equitable lens.
- Incorporate public environmental education on the importance of lowering plastic use and more specifically plastic straw use to ensure efficacy.
- Include other materials that can be regulated in the same manner as plastic straws such as plastic cutlery and other plastic utensils in legislation to increase impact.

#### Polystyrene

- Implement a ban on expanded polystyrene (EPS) at restaurants, retailers and grocery stores that prohibits the distribution of EPS packaging and food service ware as well as single-use EPS coolers, and other single-use plastic food service utensils such as straws, cutlery and more.
- Include an instrument that gives businesses time and, in necessary cases, funds to acclimate to the ban, paying close attention to the needs of small businesses.
- Implement a strong enforcement plan to ensure success of the policy.

Unlike other waste, plastic will never truly break down. While something like a banana peel will biodegrade and return to the earth, plastic waste merely breaks into smaller and smaller pieces known as microplastics. These microscopic fragments of plastics have been found globally in our food systems and even our own bodies. In a study conducted by PennEnvironment on the presence of plastic in Pennsylvania waterways, microplastics were found at every site they tested. These sites include the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers, as well as smaller bodies such as Chartiers, Turtle, and Sewickley creeks and Nine Mile Run in Allegheny County. Plastic was also found in the Youghiogheny River, Fayette County, and the Connoquenessing Creek, Beaver County.

“The problem of single-use plastic pollution should not fall solely to the individual who just by going through daily life is presented with single-use plastics on a consistent basis,” said Morin. “There are better ways to reduce the harmful effects of single-use plastic pollution and we can do that through policy change.”

Movement is also happening around the concept of a circular economy here in Southwestern PA. Increasingly organizations and businesses are exploring—and demonstrating—how to move from a “linear” economy, in which raw materials are extracted, made into a product, used, and discarded, to an economy in which waste and pollution are designed out of the products. A “circular” economy is built on reusing, repairing, and remanufacturing products, and returning biodegradable materials to the earth. Regeneration and less harm underpin this strategy.

The Plastics Collaborative is a network of organizations that identifies and takes action on opportunities to reduce single-use plastics in the greater Pittsburgh region. Comprised of diverse-minded and cross-sector organizations in southwestern PA including representatives from community groups, nonprofits, businesses, and local governments, the Collaborative’s work is centered around education, policy recommendations, and pilot projects via three respective working groups. The working groups have been meeting since 2019. This white paper and an educational campaign around single-use plastics, “[Here’s Your Plastic](#)”, are both products of the Plastics Collaborative.

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