

Should Throwaway Plastics Be Banned from Our Communities?

"This proposal is insane. I would have to harken back to Prohibition to think of a precedent. We don't even ban unsafe products in this country."

The Issue in Question

The comment you just read was made by Roger Bernstein, director of state government affairs for the Society of the Plastics Industry, based in Washington, D.C. His anger was directed at a plan proposed by the city council of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in early 1989 to ban throwaway plastic food packaging from grocery store shelves and fast-food outlets for the sake of the environment.

If enacted, the ban would represent the nation's most ambitious anti-garbage law. It would altogether prohibit most plastic containers used for such items as milk, peanut butter, ketchup, and syrup. Certain plastic containers would be permitted in the city only if they were part of an acceptable recycling program.

A growing volume of city trash helped prompt the Minneapolis ordinance. Plastic waste products that could not be recycled, and that when buried did not quickly decompose, had been clogging the city's landfills and incinerators in recent years. (According to the Environmental Protection Agency, such trash will make up 15 percent of the nation's solid waste by the year 2000, more than double the current levels.)

Public Response Is Mixed The proposal raised heartfelt cries of support and keen opposition, too. Eliminating a product that had found its way into every corner of the average American's lifestyle—from the plastic dishes used beneath cuts of meat at the supermarket to the unbreakable soft-drink bottles waiting in refrigerators at home—did not promise to be an easy task.

Plastics industry spokespeople and grocers stressed the difficulties of such a sudden

change. They said a ban on plastics would drive up grocery prices. Grocery store owners in Minneapolis complained that the move would push consumers to seek out suburban stores that could ignore the ban—stores where prices would be lower. Plus, the Minneapolis grocers said, converting to new packaging would not be cheap. One food chain in the city estimated that it would cost an extra \$1.5 million per store to switch from plastic packaging to glass or paper.

Many consumers argued the other side of the issue just as forcefully. Food packaging plastics were unnecessary, they said. They littered the landscape. They take about 1,000 years to decompose naturally. If burned, they released harmful emissions into the air.

Ozone Damage Suspected To top things off, many of the plastics in question were made of polystyrene, a plastic foam containing chemicals that many scientists believe rise into the atmosphere and act to destroy the earth's protective ozone layer. Once thinned, the ozone layer permits harmful doses of ultraviolet radiation to leak through from outer space.

Members of the Minneapolis City Council received hundreds of telephone calls urging a vote in favor of the proposed ordinance. "The people have clearly spoken," said Dennis Schulstad, a City Council member. "I had more calls on this one issue than anything that has ever been before the council."

Background on the Case

The same controversy over plastic food packaging that stirred the people of Minneapolis has come up recently in many other communities across the United States. One such case in New Jersey began in April, 1989 when it occurred to a 15-year-old student named Tanja Vogt to ask her school to eliminate polystyrene trays from the school cafeteria.

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Vogt lives in rural West Milford, New Jersey. To fulfill an assignment for her high school social studies class, the sophomore researched and wrote a current-events paper suggesting that the Board of Education should stop buying polystyrene trays for the school cafeterias. She argued that the school system was reluctant to stop using these plastic foam trays simply because of the cost of replacing them. Paper trays would cost a nickel more per tray. Vogt believed that students might be willing to pay a little bit extra for a material that was biodegradable, and therefore less damaging to the environment.

Working together with her social studies teacher, Karl Stehle, Vogt began a campaign to alert other students to the issue. She spoke at school rallies to explain the environmental danger of plastic trays and talk about the role students might have in seeing them replaced. Then Vogt decided to poll her fellow students to measure their feelings on the issue. The poll results were dramatic. Eighty-six percent of the class members surveyed said they would be willing to pay a nickel more in order to have paper trays in the cafeteria.

Backing Talk With Action Edward Vogel, business administrator for the West Milford Board of Education, was impressed by the results of the poll. He said, however, that the students would have to back their talk with action. He offered to set up a test period of one week in which West Milford students would have the option of buying a cafeteria lunch on a foam tray for \$1.20 or the same lunch on a paper tray for \$1.25.

Students then faced a real choice. The same arguments that had arisen in Minneapolis in response to that city's proposed ban on plastic packaging popped up again in the New Jersey high school setting. The key arguments raised against the polystyrene tray ban were these:

- Substituting paper for plastic costs money, and the consumer (in this case, students) must always bear the added cost.
- The environmental damage that everyone talks about is largely theoretical at this point. Switching from plastic to paper trays may be wholly unnecessary.

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The Arguments For the Ban

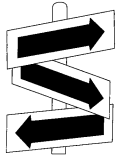
1. Polystyrene trays take up needed space in our landfills and take about 1,000 years to decompose.
2. When burned, they release dangerous chemicals into the atmosphere, thereby damaging the ozone layer and exposing the world to radiation.

The Arguments Against the Ban

1. Materials that replace the polystyrene now being used will cost consumers more.
2. Any environmental damage linked to such plastics is unproven, so finding substitutes for them does not seem worth the effort.

The Decision-Making Checklist

✓	Clarify the problem. (What is the issue or conflict?)
✓	Create a list of possible solutions. (How might you resolve the problem?)
✓	Compare the pros and cons of each solution. (What are the strengths and weaknesses of each solution?)
✓	Consider your values and goals. (What is important to you in choosing a course of action, and why?)
✓	Choose a course of action and evaluate the results. (What would you decide, and how would you judge the outcome?)



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Objective Answer the following questions based on your understanding of the issues in this case. Use an additional sheet of paper when necessary.

A. Comprehension

1. In the Minneapolis case, what did trash disposal have to do with the city's proposed ordinance banning plastic food packaging?

2. Why did grocery store owners in Minneapolis oppose the plastics ban? Give two reasons.

3. How did New Jersey student Tanja Vogt first get interested in the issue of plastic trays in her school's cafeteria?

B. Critical Thinking

Write your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1. Understanding Points of View** Imagine that you are a Minneapolis grocer who may be forced to change your way of doing business when a new city ordinance regarding plastic food packaging goes into effect. Why might you resist the idea? What arguments would you give your customers if they asked you about it?
- 2. Recognizing Cause and Effect** Part of the argument against the use of polystyrene products has to do with the chemicals these products contain. Scientists suspect that these chemicals damage the earth's protective ozone layer. Do library research to learn about the current state of scientific proof of this suspected atmospheric damage. Share your findings with the class.
- 3. Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment** If you were a student at West Milford High School and had to vote on the plastic tray issue, what position would you take? Why would you take that position? Use the Arguments For, the Arguments Against, and the Decision-Making Checklist in *Should Throwaway Plastics Be Banned from Our Communities?* to help you make your decision and develop your answer.