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Sen. McKeon to N.J. eateries: Obey the law, skip the straw, and reduce plastic waste | Opinion

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5–6 minutes

[Environmental advocates applaud NJ's plastic straw ban](#)

By John McKeon

Earth Day is a time to appreciate the world around us and reflect on how we can be kinder to the environment. This year's theme, Planet vs. Plastics, aims to phase out the use of plastics for human and planetary health. The goal is a 60% reduction in global plastic production [by 2040](#).

Here in New Jersey, we have made strides in recent years to do our part in this mission. Our single-use plastics ban was an ambitious, environmentally conscious move for the state. Roughly one-third of all plastics produced are single-use plastics, designed to be used only once and discarded. These plastics are not recyclable, do not biodegrade, and ultimately become a major source of pollution.

New Jersey's plastics ban was one of the nation's strongest, and it put us on a path to reduce waste in landfills, mitigate water pollution, and protect our wildlife. It also came at a time when we

could no longer put off taking action, as estimates show that the mass of plastic pollution in the ocean will exceed the mass of fish by 2050.

In the two years since the law took effect, businesses both big and small across the Garden State have done well in complying with part of the law and reducing plastic waste. Consumers have contributed greatly to this success, and the data shows it is having an immense impact.

According to the New Jersey Plastics Advisory Council, roughly 5.5 billion single-use plastic bags and 110 million single-use paper bags were kept out of landfills from the law's enactment in May 2022 to the end of that year alone. Clean Ocean Action, a leading environmental advocacy group that works to protect local waterways, found during its 2022 beach clean-ups that the number of plastic shopping bags, straws, and foam takeout containers had dropped by more than 35% compared to the previous year.

But while the law has effectively reduced the use of single-use plastic bags, there remains work ahead, particularly with the provision regarding [single-use plastic straws](#).

Plastic straws are undoubtedly necessary for certain people with disabilities, which is why the law stipulates that businesses provide straws "upon request." Still, some estimate that Americans use tens of millions of plastic straws daily, which continue to persist in our environment for centuries after a quick morning coffee run.

My staff and I have visited scores of fast-food chains and convenience stores around the state that still have self-service stations that provide plastic straws. Despite many of these companies having lofty environmental mission statements and

pledges to reduce waste, many are not actively trying to make a difference in practice or comply with the law.

These businesses have had ample time to adjust to the straw rule, but they have put little effort into doing so, even though these straws present a serious threat to our ecosystem. These are not mom-and-pop shops; they are large, highly profitable corporations with the necessary resources to adopt a more environmentally conscious business model. Instead, they resist change.

Smaller food establishments such as local bars and coffee shops are more conscious of the need to reduce straws, with many providing biodegradable or reusable straws or nixing straws entirely. This effort is commendable, but why should compliance fall primarily on our small businesses, and why should the power of fast-food corporations give them immunity from reducing pollution?

One glaring example: Dunkin' has over 800 locations around New Jersey. If just half of their franchises worked to cut down on the use of plastic straws, the reduction of waste would be substantial.

We need to hold these businesses to account and demand that they do their part to keep New Jersey clean. While I can acknowledge that cutting plastic straws is a small action -- and that many larger environmental problems exist -- why not begin by doing the simple and attainable?

This is why [I respectfully demand](#) the 50 largest fast-food operators, convenience stores, and restaurants remind their franchise owners and managers of their obligations to comply with our state law, and ensure that plastic straws are provided to customers *only upon request*.

By taking proactive measures to “skip the straw,” these companies can prove that their commitment to environmental stewardship is sincere and set an example for all others in the industry to follow.

State Sen. John McKeon represents the 27th Legislative District in Essex and Passaic Counties.

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