Another Voice: Bring NYC’s plastic foam packaging ban to Buffalo

By John S. Szalasny

Food for thought as you sip your takeout coffee or bring your leftovers home from the restaurant in the clamshell takeout container. Expanded polystyrene (EPS), the foundation of these containers, was invented in 1939.

All of the foam ever made for these conveniences, 80 years worth, still exists either in landfills or as trash sitting on roadsides, fields or waterways. We are at risk of being buried in the volume of this lightweight material.
On Jan. 1, New York City joined a growing list of cities that have instituted a ban on EPS foam takeout cups and containers.

The city determined that EPS foam could not be recycled and that aligns with the guidelines of our major local waste handlers, Modern Disposal and Waste Management. Neither provide municipal recycling home collection of EPS containers or packing materials even though the plastic makes up about 30 percent by volume of the waste that ends up in a landfill.

The issues with waste management are bad enough. However, EPS foam is the only packaging used in food handling that is made of known carcinogens. When heated, styrenes and benzene leach into food and drinks. Toxic exposure can be airborne or by touch. Symptoms of exposure include chronic fatigue and a decreased ability to concentrate. In addition, chemicals from EPS foam can cause liver, kidney or circulatory system problems.

Environmentally, EPS foam is a nightmare. An estimated 25 billion EPS coffee cups were thrown out last year in the United States. These cups (as well as the takeout containers) are made from fossil fuels and never biodegrade. In landfills, bulldozers moving the trash pile break down EPS into smaller pieces. The smaller pieces are very attractive to
wildlife as a possible food source. Birds and fish starve to death with stomachs filled with plastics.

EPS foams are very lightweight, blowing around in the lightest winds. Left in the field or streams, it fills with water, creating ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Alternatives exist to EPS foam packaging. Companies like McDonald's have already moved away from foam to corrugated containers and lined paper cups, both of which are biodegradable. Reusable containers are even more desirable.

Everyone is familiar with coffee mugs. But if you bring your own reusable container as your doggie bag, you're decreasing the use of EPS foam.

Essentially, EPS foams are an aggregate of microbeads, which were previously banned in Erie County in 2015. We need county legislators to match a current Albany County EPS foam container ban, and local legislators to bring New York's plastic foam ban to our hometown.

John S. Szalasny is on the executive board of the Sierra Club Niagara Group.
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