

Plastic, foam and waste management woes



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By Nate Smelle

Last Wednesday, I had the opportunity to sit in on a thought-provoking discussion between members of Hastings Highlands council and operations manager Adrian Tomasini, regarding the municipality's interest in keeping soft plastics ? polyethelene (PE) ? and foam products ? polystyrene (PS) ? out of its landfills.

The enlightening conversation took place following a presentation by Tomasini which stemmed from a resolution put forth by deputy mayor-elect Tracy Hagar. In an effort to protect the environment, extend the life of local landfills and save the municipality money, Hagar's resolution directed staff to research ways the municipality could divert these materials from its waste collection sites.

PE is typically used to produce plastic bags and packaging for paper towels, toilet paper, water bottles and pop cases and food containers; while PS is most often used to protect products such as electronics and furniture during shipping. The main problem with these materials is that their usefulness is extremely short-lived. Though the durability and lightweight of these products contributes to their effectiveness, it also makes them a heavy burden on the environment and the bottom line of waste management budgets for municipalities throughout Ontario and around the world. The same durability which makes these materials useful in the short-term, also causes them to wreak havoc on ecosystems worldwide. Furthermore, during his presentation Tomasini explained how PE and PS increase the overall cost of waste management operations because they take so long to break down, damage equipment and contaminate other recyclables.

Near the end of the discussion Hagar suggested Hastings Highlands take the lead on this issue by initiating a letter writing campaign to lobby the provincial government to ban soft plastics and Styrofoam, stating, ?We have no place for them, they should be going into our landfills, they shouldn't be ruining our earth, so what can we do now??

Putting a little extra thought into Hagar's question on the ride home, I recalled an initiative led by Sydney Snow, a Grade 3 student from Pelham, who decided to approach local restaurant owners and businesses to encourage them to stop using single-use plastic straws and utensils to help protect wildlife and the environment. Deeply disturbed by a video she saw online of a sea turtle having a plastic fork surgically removed from its nostril, she felt the need to do something and she did.

Within only a couple weeks of launching her campaign, Snow had convinced several restaurant and business owners in the Niagara Region to choose biodegradable alternatives. What made Snow's campaign such a success was her realization that each of these business owners ? and every one of us for that matter ? has the potential to make a difference for future generations through the choice choices we make.

Through my investigation I learned that the wide range of carcinogenic, neurotoxic, and hormone-disruptive chemicals used and generated from plastic production deplete our personal health when they enter our water, soil and air.

One sad testament to the ecological destruction caused by non-biodegradable single-use materials such as PE and PS is found in the story of a sperm whale that recently washed ashore off the coast of Indonesia. When marine biologists began dissecting its carcass to find out how the whale died, they discovered it had ingested 5.9 kgs of plastics, Styrofoam and other toxic trash.

I also found a homegrown example of this global shame uncovered by a recent report from Environmental Defence which revealed that there is now more than six million bits of plastic per square kilometre in the Great Lakes. Living in North Hastings one does not need to look far to see how pervasive this problem is locally. Take a stroll along any highway or paddle the shoreline of your favourite lake and it won't take long to gather more evidence than you can carry home.

Petitioning the government to step in and impose a soft plastics and Styrofoam ban is a great idea. But, as Hagar alluded ? something needs to be done now.

In response to Hagar's question regarding what we can do now to tackle this problem, I suppose each of us has the ability to implement our own soft plastics and Styrofoam ban by voting with our dollars. This does not necessarily mean we need to boycott businesses that use these products, it simply means we need to stop using the costly disposable products they provide us with for the sake of convenience. So, instead of using a straw with your beverage or taking home Styrofoam containers, plastic knives and forks, we can bring our own containers and utensils. As the undesirable materials such as PE and PS stockpile in the storage rooms of the businesses we support, they will soon find no need to reorder them. In turn, the companies manufacturing them will also eventually find them too costly to produce.