5.9. QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION REGARDING BAN OF LIGHTWEIGHT PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS

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DEPARTMENT: CEO Unit - *Connected Communities*

RECOMMENDATION

That Council resolves to endorse the submission to be sent to the Queensland Government regarding its proposal to ban Lightweight Plastic Shopping Bags.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Plastic pollution in our environment causes substantial harm for wildlife, impacts visual amenity and detracts from a tourist economy, as well as causing problems for drainage and waste management systems. The first step of a Queensland Government plan to reduce the impact of plastic pollution is to introduce a ban on the supply of lightweight plastic supermarket-style bags from July 2018. The Department of Environment and Heritage Protection has released a discussion paper on the proposed ban and is requesting feedback by 27 February 2017.

BACKGROUND

Australians dispose of four billion plastic bags a year. The average bag is used for 12 minutes but takes years to break up. Disposable plastic in the environment harms wildlife through entanglement and ingestion, impacts visual amenity and detracts from a tourist economy, clogs drainage and waste management systems, and is absorbed into the food chain creating cumulative risks for human health.

The Queensland Government is developing a plan to act on prominent sources of plastic litter, prioritising single-use packaging including disposable shopping bags and beverage containers. After exploring options through consultations with stakeholders including bans, voluntary retailer actions, education and awareness activities, and improved litter infrastructure, the Queensland Government has decided to introduce a ban on the supply of lightweight, single-use supermarket-style plastic shopping bags and a beverage container deposit scheme. The Government is also working with other states to develop complementary voluntary action to reduce the use of heavier-weight, department store plastic bags.

The Department of Environment and Heritage Protection has released a discussion paper on timelines and inclusions in the ban, and on options for voluntary action by Industry to reduce the use of heavier-weight 'department store' plastic bags. The DEHP is seeking feedback on the discussion paper by 27 February 2017.

COMMENT

Douglas Shire Council is committed to demonstrating leadership in responsible environmental practices and is a facilitator of Plastic Free Douglas: a collaboration aiming to reduce the impact of disposable plastic bags in Douglas.

The Queensland ban will take effect from July 2018 and:

- Includes thin (less than 35 microns) single-use plastic bags provided by supermarkets, takeaways and convenience stores to transport purchases
- Excludes 'barrier bags' without handles used to contain perishable food including fruit/veg and meat

Bans already exist in South Australia, Northern Territory, ACT, Tasmania and several international jurisdictions.

Unlike existing bans in other States, Queensland's will include 'biodegradable' bags because:

- Ambiguous definitions mislead customers about the impact of bags
- Biodegradable bags do not break-down quickly enough to avoid harm

PROPOSAL

That Council resolves to endorse the submission to be sent to the Queensland Government regarding their proposal to ban Lightweight Plastic Shopping Bags.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic: Preventing plastic bag litter in the environment will save Council substantial resources in rubbish clean-up and blocked waterways. Plastic litter in our environment has the potential to negatively impact upon visitor experience and, subsequently, the Douglas tourist economy.

Environmental: Plastic litter has substantial environmental impacts upon marine life and birds, gets absorbed into the food chain and potentially impacts human health. The long-term human health and environmental consequences of the absorption of microplastics into the food chain are not yet fully understood.

Social: Plastic litter impacts upon visual amenity and enjoyment of public spaces. Campaigns to reduce the use of disposable plastic bags in the Douglas Shire show that the community is in favour of further action to reduce plastic in our environment.

CORPORATE/OPERATIONAL PLAN, POLICY REFERENCE

This report has been prepared in accordance with the following:

Corporate Plan 2014-2019 Initiatives:

Theme 3 - Improve Environmental Performance

3.1.4 - Promote a culture within our communities of "zero tolerance to littering" and introduce an educational, regulatory and enforcement regime to underpin it.

Operational Plan 2015-2016 Actions:

3.1.8 - Implement opportunities to remove disposable plastic bags in the Shire.

COUNCIL'S ROLE

Council can play a number of different roles in certain circumstances and it is important to be clear about which role is appropriate for a specific purpose or circumstance. The implementation of actions will be a collective effort and Council's involvement will vary from information only through to full responsibility for delivery.

The following areas outline where Council has a clear responsibility to act:

Advocate Supporting communities and groups by advocating for certain actions from other organisations (usually other levels of government)

CONSULTATION

Internal: Sustainable Communities

External: Plastic Free Douglas, Tangaroa Blue Foundation

ATTACHMENTS

1. Douglas Shire Council Submission to Qld Govt Ban of Lightweight Plastic Shopping Bags **[5.9.1]**

Douglas Shire Council Submission: Ban of Lightweight Plastic Shopping Bags

Background

Douglas Shire Council aims to demonstrate leadership by local government in responsible environmental practices. With eighty-two per cent of the Shire included in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, preservation of the natural environment through location-specific plans, improving waste management, reducing resource consumption in Council's operations and partnering with community groups to implement education campaigns, is a key theme throughout Council's Corporate Plan. Council has committed to promoting a zero tolerance culture to litter and illegal dumping through an integrated educational, regulatory and enforcement regime.

Council is a facilitator of 'Plastic Free Douglas': a collaboration with local environmental organisations, businesses and residents to encourage retailers and shoppers in the Douglas Shire to voluntarily refrain from using single-use plastic bags. The 'Keep Paradise Plastic Free' campaign has included a Plastic Bag Free July with 100 participants, a Business Ambassador Program with over 50 local businesses committing to remain plastic bag free, and community education campaigns about the harms caused by disposable plastic.

Council strongly supports the Queensland Government's decision to ban the use of lightweight plastic shopping bags. Plastic litter impacts visual amenity and detracts from a tourist economy. Plastic in our environment has proven impacts upon marine wildlife including birds and endangered turtles. As plastics break up they leach toxins, triggering longer term impacts including potentially upon human health. The manufacture of single use packaging is an unsustainable use of fossil fuel reserves and places pressure upon waste management and drainage systems. Local governments play an important role in ameliorating the impacts of disposable plastic but the expense is ultimately borne by our communities.

Do you think that 1 July 2018 allows enough time for consumers and retailers to transition to plastic bag alternatives?

Council believes that 1 July 2018 allows enough time for consumers, retailers and Government to transition.

1. Bans on lightweight plastic bags have been in place internationally for 15 years and national chain-stores have already had to implement alternatives in several Australian States.
    a. Most stores already stock reusable bags for sale
    b. Many voluntarily offer free alternatives to disposable plastic: Bunnings with boxes
    c. Some, like ALDI, have never provided free plastic bags
2. Stores have a financial incentive to embrace the ban as shoppers will buy branded reusable bags but purchase prices can remain the same despite cost savings of no longer providing 'free' bags.
3. Surveys universally show that a majority of consumers are already in favour of bans and many voluntarily eschew disposable plastic. 86 per cent of Douglas Shire residents surveyed in 2012 were in favour of a state-wide ban.
    a. Most shoppers already own reusable bags
    b. 46 per cent of survey respondents in Douglas said they use single-use bags only when they left their reusable bags at home

   c. Customers have adapted quickly to bans in other jurisdictions
      i. South Australia's ban was implemented in 2009 and led to a 45 per cent reduction in plastic waste
      ii. A review of the ACT's ban in 2014 revealed that more than 70 per cent of respondents did not want the ban overturned
4. The effectiveness of legislation to reduce the number of plastic bags in circulation is dependent upon Government implementation and enforcement processes in place. In countries where enforcement of bans has been inconsistent and transition assistance lacking, bans have had little impact.

Do you agree that biodegradable bags should be included in a ban?

Council recognises that plant-based compostable bags do not cause the same level of environmental harm as petrochemical plastic, but supports the inclusion of biodegradable bags in the ban.

1. The environmental impact of biodegradable bags, because of the time taken to decay, is not significantly different to that of petrochemical plastic.
   a. The results of ingestion and entanglement by wildlife
   b. Visual amenity of litter
   c. Blockage of drainage channels and impact on waste disposal systems
   d. Biodegradable bags can even be detrimental to existing plastic recycling processes
2. Ambiguity around the definitions of types of 'environmentally-friendly' plastic misleads people about the impact of their actions.
   a. Litter is not an issue if it is biodegradable
   b. 'Degradable' bags break down into smaller particles of plastic, not into harmless substances
   c. 'Biodegradable' and even 'compostable' bags only break down in ideal conditions and do not degrade once buried in landfill without light and oxygen
3. Conversely, biodegradable bags can also break down too quickly in some climates. Plastic Free Douglas has received several reports from local market stall-holders that their eco-bags became brittle and fragmented in sunlight before use.
4. Single-use, disposable products require wasteful amounts of energy in their manufacture and transport, contributing to unnecessary carbon emissions and climate change.
5. Replacing one single-use, disposable bag for another does not tackle the wider problems inherent in a throw-away plastic culture. By addressing single-use bags we can change attitudes and make it less likely for other disposable plastic items (straws, coffee cups) to be used and disposed of thoughtlessly.

Do you support the Queensland Government working with other states and territories to encourage industry to reduce the number of heavier-weight plastic department store bags?

Council supports all work to encourage a reduction in the use of heavier-weight plastic department store bags.

1. Department store bags account for 1 in 7 or 0.9 billion plastic bags used in Australia each year. As they are designed to be single-use they produce similar environmental concerns to lightweight bags.
2. Responses to organisations like Bunnings shows customers are willing to adapt their behaviour when given appropriate prompts and, after having to consider alternatives at the supermarket, it will be considerably easier to do the same in department stores.
3. Stores like City Beach and Sports Girl already prompt customers to purchase a canvas bag with their items. Stores can benefit financially and with reputation by doing so.

The State Government is in a position to provide a panoptic, coordinated strategy to maximise the efficacy of voluntary efforts by industry.

1. Experiences in other jurisdictions show that charging even a small fee can substantially reduce the number of bags used: Ireland introduced a tax of 15 pence in 2002 and Hong Kong 50 cents in 2015. Both achieved an immediate reduction of 90 per cent. The vast majority of respondents to a Douglas survey stated they would use fewer bags if required to pay but, as the Target experience illustrated, stores are unlikely to support a levy on bags unless it is implemented across the board.
2. Voluntary campaigns can change retailer and customer attitudes but the Australian Voluntary Retailer Code of Practise showed that, as interest waned, the 44 per cent reduction in plastic bag use quickly diminished. Department stores need to be encouraged to install permanent processes that are convenient to staff and customers and not reliant on temporary campaign promotion.
3. No individual tactic will be successful; as people become accustomed to paying they are less likely to baulk at a fee for bags. A levy must be reinforced by other tactics making the desired behaviour more favourable than the objectionable one: the inconvenience of a levy compared with the convenience of grabbing a box from the shelf next to the checkout.

Governments are ideally placed to provide education.

1. Actions stores can take to assist customers to voluntarily forgo plastic bags: asking the customer if they want a bag or refraining from automatically bagging a single item purchase.
2. Assistance to divine suitable industry/area-specific alternatives. Survey results showed that retailers consider paper bags unsuited to the Douglas region because they tear in humidity or rain, are not useful on a bike or boat and not ideal for tourists who need to transport their purchases for long distances. Selling reusable bags was also considered impractical for tourists who would not wish to make extra purchases on a short stay.

What else can be done by the Queensland Government to address plastic pollution?

1. Increase funding for improved gross pollutant traps and rubbish control strategies in waterways.
2. Illegal dumping was identified by the CSIRO in 2014 as one of the main factors contributing to plastic litter. They determined that the prosecution of dumping “significantly reduces” debris.
3. The container recycling scheme in South Australia has reduced the dominant plastic item in the environment by one third compared with other States, but deposit schemes reduce pollution only by those items that attract a bounty.

Addressing plastic pollution from a rubbish perspective is crucial but it is more potent to prioritise efforts in line with the waste management hierarchy wherein source reduction and waste minimisation (refuse and reduce) are preferred options over reuse and recycling.

1. More than six million tons of fishing gear is lost in the ocean annually. The CSIRO in their report ‘Understanding the Effects of Marine Debris on Wildlife’ identified the main causes as overcrowding on fishing grounds, poor crew training and enforcement evasion, and identified where State Government can impact with specific, evidence-based regulation.
    a. Net characteristics such as material type and colour correlate strongly with seal entanglement in Bass Strait as plastic bag characteristics differentially impact upon turtle’s diet in North Queensland. Types of materials used by commercial and recreational fisheries and shipping can be regulated.

   b. Industry representatives with government and CSIRO have identified several actions to reduce loss of fishing nets at sea. Most nets originate in Indonesia where the nets have an economic value and are worth recovering if possible.
      i. Logging of lost/found nets would assist in avoiding hazard to vessels and gear by identifying snagging points and would facilitate profitable salvage operations.
      ii. Fishing gear labelling and inventory was suggested as a potential solution, supporting a reporting system.
      iii. Financial incentives could include low interest loan programs for gear, conditional on return of damaged or worn gear.
2. Beverage containers are a highly littered item and are increasingly made of plastic. Many of these result from the purchase of bottled water which can be ameliorated by education campaigns and promoting the provision of drinking fountains and reusable drink-bottles.
3. Microplastics have the potential to affect organisms ranging from plankton to fish to the humans who eat them. The full implications of health impacts due to chemical transfer are unknown but may include endocrine disruption, cell necrosis, tumour development, liver stress and mortality. Of great environmental concern are microbeads entering water sources through use in products like shampoo and skin cleansers.
   a. Microbeads are too small to be filtered by wastewater treatment plants.
   b. Several Australian supermarket chains have voluntarily committed to removing microbeads from their home-brand products.
   c. The most effective way to prevent microbead pollution is for Industry to cease adding them to products. Currently this decision is left to individual companies' preference.
4. Excessive and unnecessary single-use packaging is found on many products in supermarkets and department stores. To address unnecessary layers of packaging requires a coordinated effort across many jurisdictions.
5. The biggest cause of plastic pollution is public behaviour. To change the culture of plastic 'throw-away' it is necessary to reinforce to the community the value of not producing or allowing the supply of the item in the first place. Governments can educate and support community acceptance of change attitudes and altered behaviour.
   a. Single-use packaging
   b. Straws and coffee cups
   c. Disposal of cigarette butts
6. State Governments are in a position to fund and promote analysis to evaluate the most cost-effective responses at State and Local level to reducing pollution.
   a. Support consistent, long-term monitoring and recording of data allowing the source and impacts of different types of plastic pollution to be quantified.

Prepared with advice and resources from:

- Tangaroa Blue Foundation. www.tangaroablue.org/
- Plastic Free Douglas. http://www.plasticfreedouglas.org.au/
- Hardesty, Britta Denise, Chris Wilcox, TJ Lawson, Matt Lansdell and Tonya van der Velde 2014. Understanding the effects of Marine Debris on Wildlife, A Final Report to Earthwatch, www.csiro.au.
- www.environment.act.gov.au/waste/plastic-bag-ban
- www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/10/10/fresh-calls-nationwide-plastic-bag-ban
- ACT Government Interim Review of the Plastic Shopping Bags Ban November 2012
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phase-out_of_lightweight_plastic_bags
- http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-21/microbeads-beauty-exfoliating-products-environmental-damage/7095108
- http://www.beatthemicrobead.org/