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Student activism welcomed by Orinda City Council; Styrofoam ban ordinance to follow

By Sora O'Doherty

A student group from Miramonte High School has been persistent in urging the Orinda City Council to ban Styrofoam takeout food and beverage containers, and the council has agreed to introduce an ordinance. The students, including Devon Bradley, Sheng Shu, Leo Cardoza, Joseph Manio, and Alexis DeBusschere are members of the Miramonte Environmental Club that has been running a community-funded project launched last July to promote environmental sustainability and help restaurants during the pandemic. The group has been donating compostable takeout supplies to restaurants since July, and they believe they can continue to help restaurants until the proposed ban takes effect.

Styrofoam is not recyclable or compostable, decomposes in landfills, produced methane, and ends up in the ocean where it is consumed by animals that may eventually be consumed by people. There is an existing ban at the county level and 10 cities within the county also ban use of the material, including nearby Lafayette and Walnut Creek. The students propose that Orinda ban the retail use of Styrofoam takeout food containers and cups, with some exceptions, including pre-packaged items, and Styrofoam ice chests. In their presentation, the students said that Styrofoam contributes to the hole in the ozone layer and leaches into food from containers, especially when used for hot or fatty foods. This can lead to the consumption of styrene, a possible human carcinogen or neurotoxin. Only four restaurants were found to be using Styrofoam containers: Europa, Serika, Baja Cali and Sushi Island.

In response to a question from Mayor Amy Worth, the students talked about Project HEART, which stands for Help Environment Assist Restaurant Takeout. The project helps the restaurants by supplying compostable supplies, and the students believe that they could continue to help by supplying free supplies for a certain period using funds raised by their GoFundMe campaign.

All of the city council members commended the students on their sustained effort. Members of the public, including Nick Waranoff and Latika Malkani, also praised the students and their project. Mayor Worth added her praise for Miramonte public speaking teacher Christine Plant who inspired the students. Waranoff offered to help draft the ordinance and Malkani offered to publicize the GoFundMe campaign. Senior Planner Adam Foster, who presented the staff report, told the council that he was working for the city of Lafayette at the time that they adopted their Styrofoam ban, and could work on developing the ordinance for Orinda, drawing from other local ordinances.

Council Member Nick Kosla wondered if the city could conduct a buy-back program to remove Styrofoam from the city, and if there is any safe way to dispose of it. Staff will bring the ordinance to a city council meeting for action soon.

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