

The Daily News.

It's time for a pragmatic approach to plastic problem

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Larry Jackson, with the Galveston's Park Board of Trustees, maneuvers the "Priscilla the Parrot Fish" sculpture onto the sidewalk at Saengerfest Park in Galveston on Friday. The large sculpture, made from plastic debris from the beaches in Oregon, is one of 20 being displayed around the island through March 5.

JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

GALVESTON

The bad news is plastics are a huge environmental problem, particularly in our waterways and for marine life. The good news is that it's a problem we and the industry can all play a part in solving without deep sacrifice or loss of jobs.

The solution calls for pragmatism and awareness, attributes of at least two programs underway in Galveston.

To believe we'll all stop using plastic is a pipe dream. And to vilify all plastics is silly and pointless.

"Plastics are everywhere and are in everything because of the many benefits they provide," according to Michigan-based Petoskey Plastics. "Plastic is cheaper, lighter and more versatile than most other materials."

Among the advantages of plastic is its thermal and insulating properties, which make it ideal for structural wiring, electronics and many other applications, according to the company.

"Using plastics in housing insulation makes our homes significantly more energy efficient and reduces the costs of heating and cooling. Plus, plastic valves and pipes hold up against corrosion and are cheaper and easier to install than pipes made from other materials. Plastic components in cars dramatically reduce vehicle weight and increase miles per gallon, saving the owner fuel."

There's also this to consider: The U.S. plastics industry accounted for an estimated \$432 billion in shipments and more than 1 million jobs in 2019, according to the 2020 Size & Impact Report, an annual publication of the Plastics Industry Association.

At the state level, California's plastics industry workforce is the largest with an estimated 79,700 workers in 2019. Ohio places second with 74,500 workers, and Texas third with an estimated 71,400. Many hundreds of those work in Galveston County.

The plastics sector in the county covers a broad group of producers, which make raw materials and parts for many industry sectors, including energy, aerospace, biomaterials, medical devices and automotive, according to Galveston County Texas Economic Development.

The problem isn't plastics, so much as people and single-use plastic products, which are more likely to end up in our seas than reusable options, according to environmental organizations.

Examples of single-use plastics include cutlery, plates, straws and stirrers, balloons, food containers, cups for beverages, beverage containers, cigarette butts and plastic bags.

The sculptures were made by Washed Ashore, an educational nonprofit that focuses attention on the problem of pollution in the oceans and waterways.

Washed Ashore sculptures have been featured at Disney World's Epcot Center, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the Houston Zoo.

Galveston is the first place they have ever been displayed outside a paid gate, thanks to the Galveston Park Board of Trustees. The sculptures are aesthetically pleasing from a distance. Get closer, and you'll see they're made of plastic shovels, bottles caps, beer cans, cigarette lighters, combs, sandals, a bowling pin, fishing lures, toothbrushes and more.

Washed Ashore, which has been spreading its message for 12 years, has collected more than 37 tons of trash from beaches. And nearly 35 million tons of plastic entered global aquatic ecosystems in 2020, according to the Ocean Conservancy.

Although it's tough to say how much plastic is in the ocean, scientists estimate about 8 million metric tons. That's the weight of nearly 90 aircraft carriers.

Meanwhile, representatives from Circularity Informatics Lab at the University of Georgia were in Galveston this week collecting community-level data on plastic usage to inform local decision-making, they said. You can read more about that in the news pages Friday.

Last week, Perpetual, a nonprofit launched earlier this year, offered a presentation in Galveston about reducing single-use plastic pollution. Perpetual discussed the potential of bringing a reusable foodware program to the city through a community-led program.

Such programs would need buy-in from food vendors.

Marin County in California in May adopted an ordinance banning single-use plastics for foodware. The ordinance specifies that reusables are best, compostable fiber foodware is compliant and single-use plastics are prohibited.

This is Texas and such bans have rarely worked. But we should encourage ourselves and businesses to reduce single-use plastics, which are burdening landfills and creating litter that flows into our waterways. Consumer demand rather than bans will go a long way in resolving the problem.

It's time we all started thinking about our plastic consumption.

"With mountains of plastic waste piling up in landfills and scientists estimating that there will be more plastics by weight than fish in the ocean by 2050, the growing environmental challenge presented to the world by plastics is well understood," the National Renewable Energy Laboratory reported in April. "What is less well understood by the scientific community is the lost energy opportunity. In short, plastic waste is also energy wasted."

The laboratory's analysis of discarded plastics examined seven materials — variously used to make bottles, CDs, milk jugs, take-out containers and bags, among other items. Communities across the country spent about \$2.3 billion on plastic waste disposal in 2019.

If just 1 ton of plastic is recycled, past estimates suggest it could save 13.8 barrels of oil and 810 cubic feet of landfill space, according to sciencealert.com.

Completely avoiding plastic in our daily lives is unrealistic. But we can and should do so much better than we are. And it's time to start talking about practical solutions, ways to reduce the use of plastic and what do with the mountains of it already in our landfills and floating in our oceans.

We should support initiatives such as Perpetual's and consider what we can do as individuals to reduce plastic pollution.

Deniers don't believe humans have created the climate crises. But no sane person can with a straight face deny we've created the plastic problem. We can solve it, too. And we can start now with these tips from Ocean Society:

- Reduce consumption of single-use plastics.
- Recycle properly.
- Participate in or organize a beach or river cleanup.
- Avoid products containing microbeads, which are tiny plastic particles that have become a growing source of ocean plastic pollution in recent years.
- Spread the word and stay informed on issues related to plastic pollution and help make others aware of the problem.
- Support organizations addressing plastic pollution.
- Laura Elder

Editor's note: The Daily News relies on many plastic products, including single-use bags that protect paper versions of our product from getting wet during delivery. We acknowledge lacking a good alternative to them.