

TESTIMONY



Testimony of Sal Risalvato

Chairman Smith, members of the Committee, my name is Sal Risalvato, Executive Director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store, Automotive Association (NJGCA), here representing several hundred convenience stores across this state, almost all of whom are independent small businesses.

The issue of how we, as a society, deal with the prevalence of single-use plastics is one that is growing in importance and has been at the center of a lot of media attention in the last few months. Convenience stores make frequent use of these types of plastics because they are, as our name implies, *convenient*.

Of the several provisions of this bill, **by far the most disruptive to my membership would be the plastic straw ban**. I have even heard some advocates declare that a straw ban would be simpler than banning items like plastic bags and Styrofoam containers, but I disagree completely. There are alternatives available to fill the niches satisfied by those products (although they are more costly). But, at least for now, **there is not a true alternative to the plastic straw**.

There are straws made of paper, but these are completely lacking in durability for more than a few minutes. Restricting the usage of straws at restaurants makes sense, since the customer is going to be sitting peacefully at a table for the complete duration of their meal. But a customer at a convenience store who needs a straw is immediately getting in their car. The straw may sit in a large cup for an hour or more as the consumer drinks it, leaves it behind for a while, carries it around, etc. Paper straws are also about seven times more expensive than plastic ones, a cost which will of course slightly impact the consumer. There are also some single use plastic straws which at least claim to be biodegradable, but these would be banned under the current language of the bill as well. There are reusable straws made of metal or bamboo, but by definition a consumer needs to bring the straw with them in advance, and have previously cleaned it, which complicates the convenience aspect of our members' business model.

Just this week I discussed this bill with a member of our organization. He told me that he has been interested in offering paper straws as an option for his customers for several months, but simply cannot find them. Most distributors he has talked with do not offer them, and those that do are already being hit with such a huge surge in demand that they simply cannot provide them. I imagine this problem will only get worse if a state with 9 million residents decides to enact the nation's first statewide ban.

Starbucks, a massive corporation with the ability to leverage the buying power of 28,000 retail locations worldwide, has announced that they hope to eliminate straws at their locations in 2020 by replacing them with plastic lids customers can drink through. It should be noted however, that

a recent report calculated that the current straw and thin lid combination at Starbucks consists of 3.55 grams of plastic for a large cup, while the new straw-less lids have 4.11 grams, meaning a 15% increase in the amount of plastic used and immediately thrown away.¹ Some consumers may respond to the lack of a good straw by purchasing their soda in bottle form instead of from the fountain, which of course uses significantly more plastic.

Straws are not a threat to our parks and beaches when they are disposed of properly, as most consumers do. Why must we inconvenience the vast majority of the public when it is only a small portion who are actively littering?

It is the convenience aspect of our industry that also leads us to oppose a ban on plastic bags. Much of our customer base comes from consumers making spur of the minute decisions to stop in the store; they are not putting enough forethought into their trip to the convenience store that they could have planned to carry a reusable bag with them. Often they are not even purchasing enough goods to justify a bag and choose not to take one anyway.

Allowing convenience stores to continue to offer plastic bags—even with the fee being proposed for paper bags—would not significantly lessen the effect of a ban on bags in other circumstances. Our early research also indicates that the cost of a paper bag is not covered by the 5¢ that the retailer will be able to keep under this bill.

We would also prefer that the government not ban the use of polystyrene foam products, which is not only more cost effective than other alternatives but more effective at keeping food and drinks at the proper temperature.

Overall, it is better to start with carrots instead of sticks, and encourage the public to volunteer to cut back on the waste they generate. Perhaps in a few years, after there has been more cultural acceptance and better alternatives have been developed and become widespread and cheaper, at that point would a ban would make more sense and be more effective.

Even under one of the highest estimates of straw-usage, worldwide straw consumption only amounts to about 0.03% of total plastic pollution per year.² One environmentalist recently wrote “critics of the plastic straw movement point out that straws are small, and reducing the use of a larger product would be much more impactful. While that’s true, single-use plastic straws are relatable products we have all used, and forgoing them is an easy behavior change for many who are new to the movement. Environmentalists know that the plastic straw movement isn’t actually

¹ <https://reason.com/blog/2018/07/12/starbucks-straw-ban-will-see-the-company>

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-06-07/plastic-straws-aren-t-the-problem>

about straws, but is rather a gateway to the larger effort to reduce unnecessary and harmful waste in our oceans.”³

If the point of cutting back on plastic straw usage is to more easily convince people to be more aware of the pollution they generate in everyday life, then a government-enforced ban is actually the worst direction to take, because it completely takes the onus off the consumer and makes it so they never think about the issue again (unless it’s to curse environmentalism after their paper straw disintegrates).

I ask that you remove the total ban on plastic straws from this bill. Instead, consider what California has just enacted, which is to ban straws from full-service restaurants unless the consumer requests one. This would be the most effective compromise, it would significantly reduce straw usage without impinging on the choices of the general public, who sometimes have a genuine need that can only be filled by a plastic straw.

Thank you.



³ <https://www.newsweek.com/problem-plastic-straw-ban-opinion-1054966>