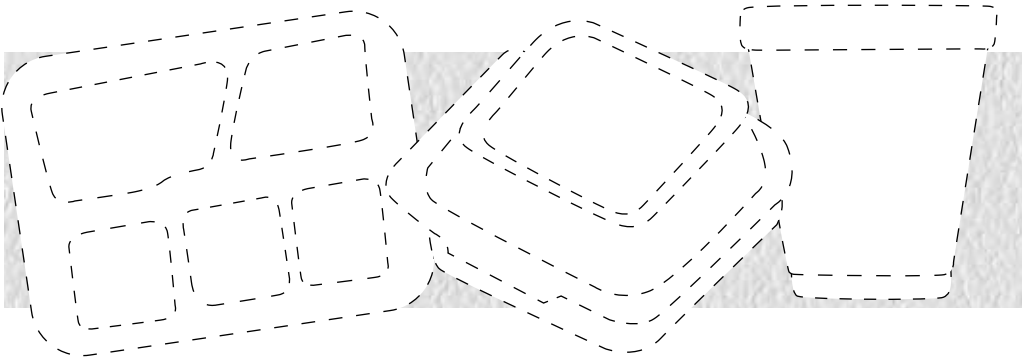


# Breaking the Styrofoam Grip On Chicago



**WHEN CHICAGO PUBLIC** Schools open their doors at the end of this month, cafeterias across the city will begin the monumental task of serving about 400,000 student lunches per day. Each lunch is served on a disposable tray made of polystyrene, often referred to by the trade name of Styrofoam. Made from petroleum, polystyrene trays contain known carcinogens and neurotoxins that can leach into food. Fifty-seven chemical byproducts are released in the production of the foam. And yet, most parents of public school students are unaware that their children are eating one meal per day on a bed of potentially dangerous chemicals. And, that's to say nothing of the waste and pollution the Styrofoam causes once thrown away.

Luckily, help is on the way.

In February 2009, a group of concerned friends joined forces to create No Foam Chicago, a volunteer organization to educate the general public and the Chicago City Council about the dangers of polystyrene food packaging. Over one hundred American cities and counties have already outlawed polystyrene, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland, and the volunteers behind No Foam Chicago hope that the Windy City will follow suit.

"Styrofoam has always been somewhat of a pet peeve of mine," said Stacy Pfingsten, an environmental activist and founder of No Foam Chicago. "When I saw that there were many cities that have already banned or are going to ban Styrofoam, I thought, 'Why not

Chicago? Why haven't we?'"

The case against foam containers is a formidable one. Styrofoam products are manufactured with HCFC-22, a greenhouse gas that can harm the ozone layer. Some foam containers make their way into our parks and green spaces as litter, where they break apart and become a fatal choking risk for wildlife.

Other polystyrene containers reach their final resting places in landfills, where they will remain for at least 500 years without disintegrating. And, contrary to the chemical industry's claims, the plastic is not easily recycled—most recycling plants will not accept it. Only one percent of Styrofoam products are recycled.

"The only reason it exists is because it's cheap," Pfingsten said. However, the chemical industry has successfully convinced many buyers that Styrofoam is non-toxic and recyclable, firmly establishing Big Foam's grip on restaurants, schools, businesses and churches across the city. No Foam Chicago is hoping to reverse this through a city ordinance, much like the City Council's recently-passed ban on the suspected carcinogen BPA (Bisphenol A).

"We're using a grassroots approach," Pfingsten said. We're trying to be out in the communities...and just getting the people involved and aware and educated on the issue so then they will contact their aldermen or city officials and alert them that [a ban on Styrofoam] is important to them and needs to be done."

"It seemed crazy that our city was propos-

ing to be a 'green city,'" said Karen Jacobson, another co-founder of the group who is currently in contact with the Green Restaurant Organization.

Despite its status as a relatively new organization, No Foam Chicago has garnered the support of Environment Illinois and the Sierra Club, allied itself with similar movements in New York and Philadelphia, and created a presence both in person, at events such as West-Fest in Westtown, and online, through sites such as *Facebook.com* and its own *NoFoam-Chicago.org*. As of this summer, Chicago is the only Midwestern city attempting such a ban.

The group is currently drafting an ordinance for a Styrofoam ban in Chicago. When the draft is complete, it will be presented to aldermanic offices in the hopes of acquiring a co-sponsor.

But the group is seeking more than just a ban on foam. No Foam Chicago has proposed several ways to assist restaurants following the loss of the inexpensive containers. An especially novel idea is to invite an alternative manufacturer to set up shop on the South Side to make containers out of a less environmentally harmful material, such as corn or sugarcane. A local manufacturer would reduce shipping costs for the foam alternatives, as well as create local, "green collar" jobs.

However, concerned Chicagoans need not wait for an ordinance to say no to polystyrene.

"The consumer has power," Pfingsten declared, by "pre-cycling," or refusing to use Styrofoam products. When ordering takeout or requesting a to-go box in a restaurant, consumers should speak up and ask for their food in containers that are not made from Styrofoam. Restaurants might stop using Styrofoam containers if enough concerned customers express their distaste for them.

And when those 400,000 public school students return to their once-daily meals on foam trays, parents should feel free to speak to the principals of their children's schools and express their concern. As today's kids learn more and more about the value of "going green" in their classrooms, the cafeteria down the hall is betraying those educational values.

For more information, including how to join the fight, visit *NoFoamChicago.org*.

—BENJAMIN FIRKE