

October 3, 2022

City of South Lake Tahoe
1901 Lisa Maloff Way
South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150

Re: Consent Agenda Item #5 - Ordinance Amending Chapter 4.175 (Polystyrene and Plastic Food Packaging Regulations) of the South Lake Tahoe City Code to Establish a Municipal Use and Commercial Ban on Single-Use Plastic Water Bottles (First Reading)

Dear Mayor Middlebrook, Members of the Council, and City staff -

Thank you for the opportunity to once again support the City's leadership through the proposed ordinances Amending Chapter 4.175 of the City Code in this second reading.

Since 1957, the League to Save Lake Tahoe (League) has been dedicated to protecting and restoring the environmental health, sustainability, and scenic beauty of the Lake Tahoe Basin. In line with our mission, the League supports the implementation of local laws and regulations that advance this mission.

The City's proposed ordinances help achieve both the League's mission to protect and restore the Tahoe Basin by reducing plastic pollution while also taking a big step toward implanting the City's Strategic Plan Goal 3.4 to ban single-use plastics, especially water bottles.

The City has demonstrated initiative in addressing plastic waste by banning single-use plastic bags in 2015, before the statewide ban. The City also took initiative in 2018 by passing an ordinance banning polystyrene products and requiring single-use utensils and plastic straws by request only. The City continued to work with the League and other groups to educate residents and visitors about the ordinances and the need to work together to reduce trash in the environment.

Americans currently buy half a billion bottles of water every week, enough to circle the globe twice. We consume more bottles of water than any other nation. Every second, 1,000 people open a bottle of water in the U.S. An estimated 85% of water bottles purchased end up either in landfills or in the environment each year. A plastic bottle is often only used for less than an hour, but takes centuries to decompose, turning into harmful microplastics along the way.

Each plastic water bottle uses an average of 25% of the bottle capacity filled with petroleum just to produce the bottle. It takes three times the volume of water contained in a water bottle to get one single bottle to the consumer. Beyond the manufacturing process, single-use bottles have significant environmental impacts throughout their lifecycle. The bottles require significant energy to transport and dispose of.

Single use plastics continue to be a problem in South Lake Tahoe. Between 2014 and today, the League hosted, enabled, and contributed to 172 community cleanups around Lake Tahoe. Data relevant to the City's existing and proposed ordinances implemented to reduce litter includes¹:

- 21,139 plastic water bottles picked up
- 29,513 plastic bottle caps
- 155,737 Plastic items and pieces, including:
 - 31,424 Styrofoam items and pieces
 - 19,290 straws, straw wrappers, and stirrers
 - 8,707 plastic utensils

The data shows that single-use plastics continue to be an issue in South Lake Tahoe despite convenient and similarly priced alternatives to plastic and polystyrene being readily available. These plastics from water bottles not only litter Tahoe's beaches, but degrade into microplastics that can escape into the environment and impact Tahoe's water quality and renowned clarity. Microplastics do not enter Lake Tahoe through wastewater but through improperly disposed of litter including plastic water bottles found on Lake Tahoe's beaches.

Tahoe tap water is world renowned and award-winning for its quality and taste. Many people drink bottled water because they believe it to be of a higher quality, cleaner and better-tasting, but that perception is accurate in Tahoe. The EPA regulates tap water and requires multiple daily water quality tests while the FDA regulates bottled water and only requires weekly testing, which is not shared with the EPA or the public. Bottled water also costs the consumer 1,000 times more than tap water. We are excited to support the City in providing alternatives to our community. One example is our partnership on the City's upcoming CalRecycle grant application for water bottle refill stations on City property. The League could also promote these stations to inform the public about where to get water while recreating in Lake Tahoe.

The data that the League has gathered is showing initial successes from the plastic bag and polystyrene bans. We are seeing fewer of these items, although precautions and the rise of takeout meals during COVID has been an obstacle. More education and outreach is needed to ensure that our local businesses know about the ordinances and are doing their part to help Keep Tahoe Blue.

The League has long supported the City in outreach and education around litter reduction. Along with continued and accelerated outreach and education, we are asking the City to adopt an additional ordinance and bolster the existing ones to help reduce litter before it enters the Lake. By approving the ordinances proposed today, the City will continue to lead by example for our community members and visitors. In conjunction with the ordinances, joint outreach will help achieve a real and meaningful reduction in plastic litter.

The League is committed to continuing and enhancing our support using our staff and volunteers to educate residents, visitors, and businesses about the ordinances and providing information on alternatives to plastic and polystyrene.

¹ Note that this data is for the whole lake, not just South Lake Tahoe

We believe the community is with us. Attached is a letter that we gained 324 signatures on since just last Thursday, at least 66 of those from residents of the City of South Lake Tahoe.

Thank you again for your leadership and we look forward to working with the City on this endeavor to help achieve our common goals.

Please do not hesitate to contact me directly with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gavin Feiger", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Gavin Feiger
on behalf of the League to Save Lake Tahoe
Senior Land Use Policy Analyst