

City council unanimously approves plastic ban concept

With the recent United Nation Climate Change Conference recently completed, Ward 3 Coun. Donna Hilsinger said the environment is top of mind around the globe and she wants to see Sault Ste. Marie leading the charge.

Elaine Della-Mattia

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Sault Ste. Marie city councillors want to see certain single-use plastics banned by Canada Day, 2022.

City council has unanimously directed staff to move forward with a process geared to banning single-use plastics in Sault Ste. Marie.

The process will include consultation to hear the views of the public, business, not-for-profits and other organizations.

Ward 3 Coun. Donna Hilsinger, the mover of the motion, said the banning of single-use plastics is action the community can take to help the environment.

“We need to stop doing things that are hurting our planet,” she said. “We can start with some of these that will eliminate the single-use plastics simply by stop allowing them to be used.”

Hilsinger wants plastic grocery bags, plastic straws and stir sticks, plastic cutlery and plastic take-out food containers used by restaurants all eliminated – at the minimum.

She also wants to see the city create a community waste reduction strategy with robust goals, also to be implemented by the same time period.

While originally set to have both items in place next May, she agreed that a public consultation process would be required, and a July 1, 2022 implementation date would provide more time for staff to complete the consultation and get the bylaw right.

With the United Nation Climate Change Conference recently completed, Hilsinger said the environment is top of mind around the globe and she wants to see Sault Ste. Marie leading the charge.

Ward 5 Coun. Corey Gardi was to second the motion but he was unable to attend Monday’s meeting.

In a written statement to council, he urged members not to wait for higher levels of government to implement legislation.

“When dealing with issues as they pertain to the environment, whether it be the climate crisis, or protecting it from plastic pollution, we aren’t in a position to delay any longer,” he said.

“Will there be challenges as we transition away from single use plastics? Of course. But there is no sense in delaying this transition. We as a community, as city councillors, along with residents and businesses need to act, and we should act now. I believe a majority of councillors want to protect our natural environment, including the St. Mary’s River and the Great Lakes, as well as address the challenges at our local landfill,” his statement read.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker, who stepped in as the seconder, said he thought the motion was a little far reaching at first but now believes that a bylaw can be enacted, with some exceptions.

City solicitor Karen Fields confirmed the city does have the legal right to implement such a bylaw.

“But it’s not without its challenges,” she said.

For instance, the bylaw cannot conflict any provincial or federal legislation that may be implemented in the future.

She said consultation will likely result in hearing from many of the 571 businesses across the city that could be affected by it, and that, in the end, may create some exceptions for a plastic ban.

Enforcement issues by the already stretched resources of limited bylaw officers also needs to be considered, Fields said.

Her initial research suggests that Toronto is taking a phased-in approach, focusing its efforts on education first before enforcement because of its limited resources.

Other communities have considered some exceptions to the plastic ban that Sault Ste. Marie will also need to consider.

For example, dog waste plastic bags may still be required because the market has not caught up to the plastic reduction trend yet. Hospitals also require plastics to prevent infection and spread of viruses and food trucks must use disposable cutlery.

“There is merit to strive for something ambitious like this,” Shoemaker said. “We don’t want to see a continued use of non-recyclable items in our landfill at an ever increasing amount or quantities.”

Ward 1 Coun. Sandra Hollingsworth said she wanted to see Styrofoam added to the list of banned products. Hilsinger said that was not an item considered initially because she was striving to get the ban implemented within an ambitious timeline.

Ward 5 Coun. Matt Scott said his issue is that some research suggests that paper bags take three or four more times to produce and the production creates even more carbon emissions than the production of plastic bags.

However, he added, the literature is clear and notes that reusing any and all types of bags is key and that should be encouraged within the community.

Ward 2’s Lisa Vezeau-Allen said it’s also important to consider non-profits and the soup kitchen, which would find purchasing eco-friendly packaging as very taxing on their budget.

“These products are extremely expensive and it is difficult for us to dictate that to them,” she said. “I struggled with this due to the cost of alternatives for non-profits so I want to see consultation with them.”

Vezeau-Allen also suggested that Algoma Public Health and Clean North be involved in developing the bylaw and its exception.

Her wardmate, Coun. Luke Dufour, said his fear is that internal resources and bylaw officers in Sault Ste. Marie are already stretched thin.

“I don’t want our internal resources redirected from the core municipal functions of our building bylaws which make sure our city is maintained,” he said.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian said he has no problem supporting the resolution. He issued a challenge to the public and urged them to get involved in the consultation process, especially if there are concerns.

“If you have something to say, do so. This is an important issue to the community and the community needs to be included as part of the process,” he said.

Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro said he wants to make sure a thorough process is followed so at the end of the day the bylaw is not challenged.

Hilsinger said her goal is to see this bylaw implemented.

“I just want to make this happen, and if it’s better to do it with consultation and we have a solid date to implement the bylaw, then I’m perfectly fine with that,” Hilsinger said.