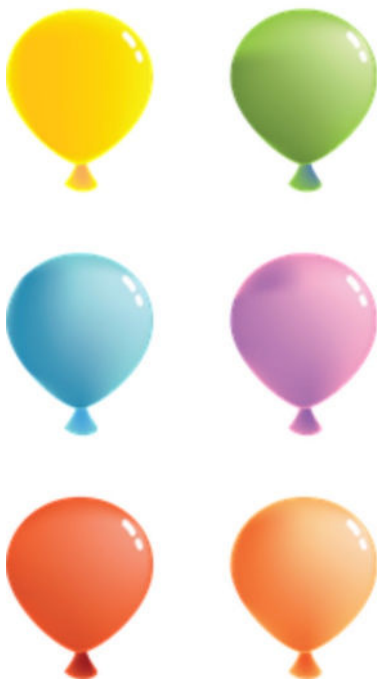


County bans balloon releases

by Mahreen Khan



COURTESY IMAGE

The Suffolk County Legislature unanimously approved a local law last week prohibiting the intentional release of helium and other types of balloons.

The ban specifies helium, latex, Mylar and plastic balloons, and any that are lighter than air. The bill follows recent East Hampton and Southampton Town measures. A previous county law, passed in 2002, limited the number of balloons that could be released in a 24-hour period to 25.

The proposal to ban balloon releases drew wide support at a public hearing in July from those who argued the materials harm marine mammals and seabirds.

Members of the NFEC Programs Director Debbie O’Kane (NFAS) and North Fork Environmental Council (NFEC) initiated the Plastic Reduction and Elimination Project in June 2018 after working with the Product Stewardship Institute outside of Boston.

At a recent meeting, the groups discussed changes that can be made to how residents view and consume plastic products. Geared toward minimizing, if not eradicating, plastic consumption in neighboring towns and villages, and across the county, the group spoke on a series of recently passed and proposed pieces of legislation — including the intentional balloon release ban.

They also discussed upcoming events, including participation in the International Coastal Cleanup on Saturday, Sept. 21 at Iron Pier Beach in Jamesport, Bailey’s

Beach in Mattituck and Truman's Beach in East Marion. Using the app Clean Swell, created by nonprofit Ocean Conservancy, participants can record the different types of plastic they collect. Data is compiled globally — as the app was used in more than 122 countries last year — and analyzed. The app is not limited to Sept. 21, and is encouraged to be used any time.

NFAS and NFEC members will have a table set up on the same day and on Sunday, Sept. 22, during Greenport's annual Maritime Festival. They plan to distribute eco-friendly literature for people to get educated and involved, potentially sell some of the products they discussed Wednesday, and create displays for people to understand the detriment being caused to the environment as a result of harmful products.

"We have to generate a demand and get people to understand that there are alternatives," said NFAS board president and NFEC Programs Director Debbie O'Kane.

Referring to single-use plastics, plastic waste and other non-biodegradable and non-compostable products, Ms. O'Kane lauded the county for its recent environmental efforts, including a ban on single-use plastic and polystyrene products.

The ban is an attempt to pressure restaurateurs to stop offering environmentally harmful take-out and dine-in products, and patrons to minimize their consumption thereof. It extends to food vendors at county parks and beaches.

The three bills associated with the ban were signed into law on April 9 and will go into effect Jan. 1.

"Even if it's on a voluntary basis," Ms. O'Kane said, "I think that if we can encourage ... restaurants on the North Fork to perhaps get into some sort of cooperative purchasing ... we can get some people to actually come together and form a committee. My understanding is that there's basically one supplier out here and I've spoken with them and they do offer a lot of compostable or recyclable products. It's just making sure people realize that that's available and also, if everyone buys, purchasing power will perhaps get them to offer a better price."

Ms. O'Kane and NFEC Board of Directors Vice President Mark Haubner highlighted a number of plastic alternatives, including silicone pouches and pockets, mesh vegetable bags and wooden cooking utensils. Ms. O'Kane held up beeswax covers, which can be reused as replacements to plastic wrap, and Chico bags, which are compactable and also reusable.

The silicone pockets, she said, can be used in place of food storage bags, like Ziploc brand ones, and do not leach dioxins, leads or phthalates. While they do require energy to produce, the relief afforded to the environment outweighs plastic storage bag use, she explained, adding that they can even be used to cook with, as in the case of sous vide dishes.

"People need to hear about the overwhelming plastic pollution problem over and over again before it really sinks in — plastic trapped in Arctic ice, plastic bags in the deepest of our Pacific Ocean trenches, entering our oceangoing food supply and butane found in human DNA," Mr. Haubner said.

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