Mayor Bloomberg’s Latest Pet Peeve

Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York, who has battled trans fats, smoking and giant-size sodas during his 11 years in office, has now proposed a citywide ban on plastic foam containers. Tucked into his State of the City address Thursday, along with other environmentally useful ideas, the proposal seeks to banish the ubiquitous plastic foam coffee cups and clamshell food containers from delicatessens, bodegas and school cafeterias.

Because the foam breaks easily, its shards litter streets and parks, clog drains, foul waterways. If these plastics get into the recycling, they have to be removed, adding to the cost of recycling, the mayor said. So what makes sense for the environment could also make sense for the city budget.

Mr. Bloomberg was not always so enthusiastic about recycling. Shortly after he became mayor in 2002, he canceled most recycling pickups in the city, citing costs and inefficiencies. He later restored recycling; he now wants to expand it. The mayor said the city would soon allow recycling of clear, rigid plastic drink and salad containers that are now tossed in with the regular garbage.

Mr. Bloomberg was also said that he wanted to tackle the “final recycling frontier: food waste.” According to Deputy Mayor Cas Holloway, cafeteria workers and students in 68 city schools have been separating food from the rest of their garbage. The food is then composted and converted into fertilizer or energy at a local waste plant. So far more than a third of the school cafeterias’ food garbage has been recycled. The mayor also promised a pilot program for curbside pickup of food waste for a composting center on Staten Island. The idea is to cut down on the 1.2 million tons of food waste the city sends to landfills each year at a cost of $80 per ton.

Though all these are worthy ideas, the ban on “foam-based food service products” could make an immediate difference. The City Council will have to approve, but Speaker Christine Quinn is on board. As she put it earlier in the week, these cups and clamshells are “worse than cockroaches.” With one big difference: Cockroaches are biodegradable.

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