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Mass. small restaurants oppose proposed plastic straw restrictions

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Small independent restaurants are registering their opposition to a Beacon Hill proposal to restrict the use of plastic straws, saying they already struggle to meet other state mandates. Paper or metal straws could add to operating costs restaurants face, they say.

Steve Clark, the vice president of government affairs for Massachusetts Restaurants Association, said the trend in customers asking for non-plastic straws at restaurants is a response to environmental concerns.

While most situations do not require straws, he said, they are necessary at places like a drive-through restaurant. Plastic straws, with a bendable head, are especially crucial for the disabled community.

Clark said many restaurants are already voluntarily providing non-plastic straws. "I think an on-demand model is something that works," Clark said. "I don't necessarily know if it needs to be legislated."

For small eateries that constantly serve takeout, Carlozzi said, not providing straws before customers demand it creates inconvenience and hurts customer experience.

"For a small business, they pride themselves on customer service," Carlozzi said, "They want that customer coming back because they had a great experience."

State lawmakers recently took testimony on three bills restricting single-use plastic straws. All three bills ask restaurants to not provide those straws to customers unless customers specifically request them.

Representing independent businesses with an average workforce of five to 10 employees, Christopher Carlozzi, the state director of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, said the restriction simply adds to mandates those small restaurants already face.

"If you go down any main street in Massachusetts the vast majority of businesses are small businesses," Carlozzi said. "You'll see unfortunately more and more of them lose out."

Rep. David M. Rogers, a Cambridge Democrat and sponsor of one of the three bills, said in an email that the bill is a sensitive restriction rather than a ban, allowing restaurants to provide plastic straws if customers ask for them.

"With this restriction, they would presumably need to purchase fewer straws, so that would save them money," Rogers wrote.

Although the bill mentions using non-plastic straws, he does not see it as a requirement. "Some restaurants may choose to start using alternatives like paper straws, but that would be up to them."

But substituting paper or metal straws for plastic would still add operating costs to small restaurants, Carlozzi said.

With only one location, he said, independent restaurants cannot space out the costs among multiple storefronts like the big brands do. Distributing paper straws as Starbucks does is impossible for smaller outfits, according to Carlozzi, so they would be forced to raise menu prices or cut the workforce.



GETTY IMAGES (ADRIENNE BRESNAHAN)

State lawmakers recently took testimony on three bills restricting single-use plastic straws.

During a recent hearing on Beacon Hill, Carlozzi testified against the bill on plastic straws as well as legislation restricting single-use utensils, packaging, balloons and bottle caps.

Carlozzi said many small businesses are currently coping with many labor mandates, including the paid family medical leave tax that went into effect on Oct. 1 and an increase in the state's minimum wage. The current minimum wage is \$12 per hour, while the minimum wage for tipped employees is \$4.35. By January 2023, those wages will rise to \$15 per hour and \$6.75 per hour, respectively.

"These all add to the cost of doing business," Carlozzi said. "And it all impacts job creation and business growth in the Massachusetts economy."