

Party's over for plastics

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Greater Dandenong Council has resolved to ban single-use plastics such as bags, straws, balloons and bottles at festivals and sport events on council property within 12 months.

In a move to reduce plastic pollution, items such as plastic coffee-stirrers, cutlery and cups and "unnecessary soft plastic packaging" will also be prohibited.

The ban will apply to Council departments in six months, and to sport clubs, leisure facilities and community groups in 12 months.

Exemptions apply to small-scale events that don't require a council permit and people who require straws for health or disability reasons.

Dandenong Market and its commercial operators will also be exempt, but "supported" to seek more sustainable options.

In support, Cr Matthew Kirwan said "indiscriminate use" of disposable plastics caused "well-publicised" damage to human health and the environment.

Balloons were killers of sealife and birdlife, choking them after ingestion. Straws, the

eight most common plastic product in oceans, killed marine life particularly turtles, he said.

"Our ocean surface waters are now estimated to contain over 5 trillion plastic pieces, weighing over 250,000 tonnes.

"It is estimated that unless action is taken that there will be by 2050 more plastic, by weight, in our oceans than fish."

Plastic litter was visibly collecting in Greater Dandenong's creeks, he said.

As plastics degrade, they leech toxic chemicals such as vinyl chloride, dioxin, benzene and formaldehyde into the water-stream.

Up to 10 Victorian councils had adopted similar policies, Cr Kirwan said.

Cr Tim Dark, in opposition, said the "absolutely crazy" policy would be hard to police and enforce.

"Every single time I go past a park you know when there's a party going on. A good indicator is the use of balloons. The use of straws is also very prominent.

"To say to anyone having a birthday party and function, you can't use any balloons or

plastic straws. It's going to be nearly impossible to police."

Multicultural groups relied on sponsor's balloons to help fund their events. Sports clubs also relied on selling soft drinks and foods to survive, Cr Dark said.

A dissenting Cr Peter Brown said the policy wasn't workable. "It's lunacy," he said.

"This is a warning to mums and dads who want to take their kids on a picnic.

"You can't use plastic straws, kids. You can't have a balloon for your birthday, you can't use a single-use plastic cup ...

"And above all, you can't have a water bottle in plastic, but bring a glass bottle so it can break somewhere."

Cr Kirwan said there was no ban on plastics for "families having a picnic or a birthday party in a park".

"The policy is aimed at large community events that need a permit."

The transition period would allow people, groups and centres to find the many cheap alternatives to plastics and to apply for exemptions when appropriate, he said.

Cr Sean O'Reilly said alternatives to plastic straws and balloons could be found.

"I'm sure the children won't miss what they don't have."

Cr Loi Truong called for either the council or State Government to collect or destroy unused single-use plastic bags from businesses.

"Some shops still have a couple of thousand plastic bags."

He questioned how many times that thicker plastic bags were re-used before thrown in the rubbish.

"I think the trouble will be bigger because many, many plastic bags will be thrown away. The problem will be worse than before."

Sport clubs and aquatic and leisure centres and community centres would be able to sell drinks in single-use plastic bottles in the short-term.

However, they must provide visible access to drinking water and supply reusable bottles or cups.

In the long term, they would be expected to transition away from single-use plastics, acting city planning director Brett Jackson said.