

Resolution 70: *The Last Straw*: Single-Use Plastic Phaseout

Abstract: Phasing out single-use plastics through a five-year transition to reusable or BPI-certified compostable alternatives. Doing so would align campus practices with Cornell’s commitments to sustainability, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

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Whereas, Cornell’s commitment to sustainability—demonstrated through initiatives such as the world-renowned Atkinson Center—stands in stark contrast to the continued use of plastics that contribute to severe environmental damage on this campus. The toxic chemicals commonly found in plastic can take anywhere from [100 to 1,000 years](#) or more to decompose, and with [less than 10% of plastic in the world](#) actually being recycled, [plastic waste continues to accumulate](#) at an alarming rate in landfills and oceans,

Whereas, single-use plastic is actively detrimental to the health of the Cornell community. [Microplastics](#) are increasingly being found in the brain, testes, heart, stomach, lymph nodes, placenta, urine, breast milk, and semen, and are associated with adverse effects, including cancers, diabetes, neurotoxicity, and reproductive toxicity,

Whereas, Cornell’s commitment to building “A Community of Belonging” and “Changing Lives through Public Engagement”—a pledge to serve “our community, our state, and the broader world, learning about their needs and strengths, and applying the knowledge we create for the benefit of society”—requires attention to the broader social impacts of plastic production and waste. Plastic production and waste, particularly, threaten the health and livelihoods of low-income communities. In the United States, predominantly African American and Indigenous communities are vulnerable targets for [petrochemical corporations](#), which intentionally dump toxic waste from plastic production. [Water contamination](#) in these communities restricts access to reliable drinking water, further contributing to illness and widening existing health disparities,

33 **Whereas**, a commitment to “Respect for the Natural Environment” and the goals of Cornell’s
34 research demand careful consideration of the ecological impacts of plastic use. Plastics harm
35 ecosystems in numerous ways. Plants exposed to [microplastic particles exhibit reduced growth](#) due
36 to stress, changes in chemical composition, disruptions in hormone regulation, and reductions in
37 photosynthesis through altered chlorophyll. Studies have also revealed that [1,557 species](#) across both
38 marine and terrestrial environments ingest plastic, while [99% of marine species contain](#)
39 [microplastics](#), which can block digestive tracts and pierce internal organs, causing animal mortality.
40 Current research further confirms that microplastics damage animal livers and cells and disrupt
41 reproductive systems, threatening population growth,

42 **Whereas**, banning plastics can [save money](#) for the university in the long term due to lower greenhouse
43 gas emissions, reduced waste processing burdens, and other environmental and social harms,

44 **Whereas**, Cornell’s [tap water quality is excellent](#), and healthier for bodies and ecosystems than
45 plastic-bottled water,

46 **Whereas**, the [SUNY system has banned single-use plastics](#). Cornell opting out of this policy to
47 avoid a ban on single-use plastics is shameful for an Ivy League university that prides itself on
48 sustainability,

49 **Whereas**, other colleges and universities, including the [University of Virginia](#), [University of](#)
50 [Colorado-Boulder](#), and the [University of California](#), have already phased out or are in the process of
51 phasing out single-use plastics, and some units within Cornell are already doing so, including the
52 Statler Hotel and several dining facilities,

53 **Whereas**, the student body has wanted to ban single-use plastics since 2010, including the passage
54 of a Student Assembly plastic bottle phase-out resolution, which was never implemented,

55 **Be it therefore resolved**, Cornell University shall eliminate single-use plastics according to a five-
56 year phase-out program from the date a ban is passed,

57 **Be it further resolved**, where elimination is not practical, single-use plastic products will be
58 replaced with BPI-certified compostable products. The university may make specific, limited
59 exceptions for health, safety, and research where there are no existing alternatives,

60 **Be it finally resolved**, Cornell will adhere to its stated values of sustainability and equality by
61 phasing out single-use plastics.

62 Respectfully Submitted,

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