

Waste Not

by Maureen McGarry



Remember these? This one was found in Old Town Eureka at Little Shop of Hers

Many baby boomers remember when it was all about what kind of lunch box you brought to school. Made of metal and decorated with comic book heroes and other images of popular culture, they often came with a thermos filled with milk. Sometime in the early '60's, brown paper bags were "discovered" as "convenient" for packing up our lunches. Wax paper sandwich bags were replaced with plastic bags. Milk was provided at school in disposable, waxed milk cartons. At dinnertime, packaged, processed dry foods in cardboard boxes with another sealed

bag inside became the side dish for our meals. These "just add water" mixes replaced canned food. Dry soup came in foil-lined paper envelopes until sealed, styrofoam cups became the rage. Even frozen vegetables started coming in plastic bags that could be plopped into a pan of boiling water. Americans began to value convenience more than healthy meals and speedy food preparation more than the art of cooking. No mess. No fuss. One result was more garbage to take out at the end of the day.

We have come a long way since then, and hard lessons have been learned in the process. We have a much better understanding of limited resources, and recycling systems for food packaging is common practice in most Humboldt County households. Reusable bags are stored in our cars for grocery shopping, and a plastic bag ban is now law.

But what about when we attend large fairs and festivals where food is prepared for us? Trash receptacles overflowing with single use paper products, plastic cups and disposable utensils have been a common sight. According to Zero Waste Humboldt, change is on the way. At a November Zero Waste Humboldt workshop at the Humboldt Area Foundation, Maggie Gainer, Maureen Hart, and Juliette Bohn, presented new strategies for reducing waste at large events and led discussion about how to implement these changes.

Twenty-six event planners from around the County came together to talk about waste prevention and creative solutions. Advance planning to prevent waste, working with food vendors, product suppliers and waste haulers were major items on the agenda. The most efficient methods for separating compostables and recyclables were discussed. Improved infrastructure for drinking water and cup/dish washing stations is the vision for the future.

“These changes can only happen with volunteer help,” says Gainer. “Educating the public at large events requires crews of well-trained and organized volunteers to serve as quality control monitors at designated stations for recycling and composting discarded materials. Zero Waste Humboldt wants to involve responsible volunteers in several research projects that will help local fairs and festivals with their waste reduction goals.”

Humboldt County has become known for events enjoyed by local families and vacationing visitors. As fairs and festivals around the country are adopting more effective zero waste practices, the public’s standards for waste reduction at Humboldt County events have increased.

Gainer reminds us that, “the most radical —and the most obvious— approach is waste prevention. While Zero Waste Humboldt provides services to help events with systems for recycling and composting discarded material, our ‘eye-on-the-prize’ is on making the proactive changes that will prevent waste in the first place.”

These days, we can pack our lunches for our families in reusable containers often made from recycled material. Styrofoam packaging has become very rare, and the local sources of fresh produce have reduced the need for cans, plastic bags and other wasteful packaging.

The Zero Waste emphasis on waste prevention is the new horizon for large events. If you are looking for volunteer opportunities to help your community reduce waste, contact Zero Waste Humboldt by email at contact@zerowastehumboldt.org or call RSVP at 442-3763.



Zero Waste’s Maggie Gainer talks to group at recent training