

Oakland leaders want to tax fast-food businesses to clean up litter

Saturday, February 4, 2006

By Terence Chea
The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — They spill out of trash cans, clog sewers and litter city streets and sidewalks. Burger wrappers, french fry containers and beverage cups discarded from fast-food restaurants and convenience stores plague cities across America.

Oakland officials are so fed up with fast-food trash that they want to tax the businesses they blame for much of the city's garbage woes, then use the money to clean up the streets.

"It's not fair that the residents have to clean up after a fast-food establishment that's making a profit," said Councilwoman Jane Brunner, who proposed the new ordinance. "A city is judged by how clean it is, and Oakland definitely has a major litter problem. It's time to clean up."

Despite protests from business owners, a city council committee last month endorsed the measure, which would impose fees on all restaurants and stores that serve takeout food or beverages. The full eight-member council was expected to vote on the ordinance Tuesday.

If approved, Oakland would be the first city in the nation to force eateries, food and liquor stores to chip in to clean up litter, industry officials say.

Businesses are fighting the measure, saying they'll be forced to pass along the costs to customers, including low-income residents and young people who are the biggest consumers of fast food.

"This is an indirect tax on the people," said Benjamin Scott, public policy director for Oakland's Chamber of Commerce. "This ordinance does little to address the problem of litter in Oakland."

Businesses say the city should educate the public and enforce littering laws. Some say they already pay employees to pick up trash in their neighborhoods.

"Littering is a crime, but they're not enforcing the law," said Johnnie Downs, director of local government affairs for the California Restaurant Association. "We need to educate the youths on why littering is bad and the effect litter has on neighborhoods."

Litter from fast-food restaurants has become a major problem in communities nationwide as more Americans depend on quick meals to accommodate "on-the-go" lifestyles, said Rob Wallace, a spokesman for Keep America Beautiful, a Stamford, Conn.-based nonprofit group.

Recent surveys show that fast-food packaging makes up about 20 percent of all litter, with packaging for chip bags, drink containers, candy wrappers and other snacks comprising another 20 percent, Wallace said. One Texas study found a connection between litter and proximity to fast-food restaurants, shopping malls and convenience stores.

"By its very nature, all fast food has significant packaging components ... that become part of the waste stream with every meal, within minutes after the point of purchase," Wallace said.

In Oakland, Brunner has received complaints about fast-food litter for the past eight years. Standing in front of a Burger King restaurant across from Oakland Technical High School, she pointed out neighborhoods where students toss lunch wrappers on streets, sidewalks and residents' lawns.

Jason Bandarra, who lives near the high school, said he picks up litter around his neighborhood three or four times a week.

"Nobody wants to have fast-food wrappers all over the place," Bandarra said. "It's just disgusting. When you have all this trash floating around the neighborhood, the neighborhood looks blighted."

Keeping the streets clean is key to revitalizing a city often seen as a poor stepchild to its more glamorous neighbor across the bay — San Francisco. Last year, Oakland went so far as to sue the state Department of Transportation for failing to clean up and prevent dumping along freeway corridors in the city.

Oakland, with a population of about 400,000, has programs for sweeping streets, cracking down on illegal dumping and asking businesses to "adopt" areas and keep them clean, but the paper bags, cups, lids, wrappers and straws won't go away.

The proposed ordinance would affect about 450 Oakland establishments, including about 60 fast-food chains, 90 liquor stores and 300 other businesses that sell food and beverages in disposable packaging, Brunner said.

Businesses would be required to pay fees ranging from \$230 to \$3,800 based on their income. Brunner estimates that more than three-quarters of the affected businesses would only pay the minimum fee, which amounts to 63 cents a day.

The larger fast-food chains would pay higher fees, but restaurants that are part of business improvement districts that volunteer to clean up their neighborhoods would be eligible for fee reductions or exemptions.

The city would use the projected \$237,000 a year to hire small crews to pick up litter in commercial areas around high schools and middle schools where most of the garbage is found.

As part of the program, Oakland police would conduct "litter stings" and ticket litterbugs, and schools would teach students about the costs of littering, Brunner said.

Christopher Waters, who owns a small cafe in North Oakland, said he backs the proposal.

"We all have to take responsibility for the products we sell," Waters said, "before and after people walk out the door with them."

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