

FCPS not doing enough for environment

The overuse of plastic is an impending doom on our society. As more plastic waste fills the Earth's landfills, oceans, and waterways, consumers are asked to be more cautious of the waste they produce.

While most of the students and staff cannot help this problem on an international scale, we can make change in our county.

FCPS uses large amounts of plastic each day during lunch periods. Plastic straws and plastic utensils are seen in large tubs. Many times students grab utensils and straws even if they don't need them. Even the fruit is in a small plastic cup.

FCPS has made strides in recent years to reduce their plastic waste by switching from pink polystyrene trays to the current molded fiber trays. The Office of Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) follows waste guidelines provided by the government. These guidelines make sure the FNS does not produce large quantities of food waste.

The FNS has two major vendors for cafeteria supplies, Dade Paper & Bag LLC and Riverside Paper Supply Company. During the 2018-19 school year, FCPS spent about \$1 million on cafeteria supplies. FCPS has been working with their vendors to get paper straws instead of plastic in middle and high schools.

There have been many initiatives to help make our school system more environmentally conscious. Clubs at AHS, like the Green Atoms, are also helping by recycling and managing the courtyards.

However, FCPS and AHS still produces a large amount of garbage.

FCPS is not the only reason there is so much waste. Schools around the county are horrible at recycling and trash is still being produced in large sums.

According to FCPS Get2Green, a FCPS sponsored environmental program, AHS has been lowering the amount of recyclables produced. In 2018, 81.19% of waste was trash and only 18.81% of waste was recyclable.

Other high schools, like Justice and Woodson, recycle as bad as AHS or worse. One reason for this is the size of the school. In 2018, 79.43% of waste produced at Woodson was trash. The other 20.57% were recyclables.

Elementary schools are the best recyclers in the county because they are so small. Another reason is recyclables being thrown in the trash anyways.

Students bring in sports drinks, soda cans and other recyclable materials and then throw them away in the garbage can. Students need to recycle properly because our custodial staff does not sort out the trash.

All student and staff must do their part to help make FCPS and AHS more environmentally friendly.

Pacific plastic problem persists

Every year, more than 8 million tons of plastic are pumped into the ocean, according to the Plastic Oceans Foundation. Approximately 90% of the world's plastic items are never recycled, and many scientists believe every piece of plastic

created is still in the atmosphere. The problem seems to be insurmountable, so when one person came up with an idea, many people praised them and backed their idea.

Dutch inventor Boyan Slat was an 18-year-old aerospace engineering student when he came up with his plan to clean the swirling mass of trash in the Pacific Ocean, known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Now 24, he's seen his ideas come to fruition.

Slat's clean-up contraption consists of 40ft pipes -which are ironically made of plastic- that will be fitted together to form a long, snaking tube. Filled with air, they will float on the ocean's surface in an arc, and have nylon screens hanging down below forming a giant floating dustpan to catch the plastic rubbish that gathers together when moved by the wind currents and waves.

However, his invention has suffered from pitfalls throughout its beta period. For one, he discovered plastic occasionally drifts out of its U-shaped funnel. He also discovered his creation is very frail, after a 60-foot-long end section broke off while being tested.

Slat believes he has the resources to improve his device, but many critics raised concerns over his project. Many critics believe the solution to plastic problems needs to be addressed by eliminating the source of plastic, rather than cleaning up the waste.

This option would require a lot more effort from the world, and it's probably one reason why Slat's plastic-cleaning device drew so much praise. Many people saw this as their golden ticket out of accepting responsibility for the excess plastic problem.

It would require a fundamental redesign and innovation of the current economic standard for packaged goods from "consume and dispose" to "consume and collect." This would require reusable

packages and a highly increased recycling effort which would require a mobilization of consumers. For many people, this is just way too much effort. Letting someone else solve the problem is the most convenient solution.

So it's a good thing we have people like Slat who are highly motivated to tackle problems affecting the world. Slat has not let his critics get in the way, and remains focused on solving his goal.

"Considering the things we have been able to prove in the past few months and considering the problems that we have faced, they seem quite solvable," Slat said, in an interview with NPR. "I'm confident that the team will be able to design appropriate solutions for this and that we'll have the system back in the patch in a few months from now."

Slat's vision is to deploy a fleet of 60 more devices, essentially like a garbage truck fleet for the ocean. They would carry the plastics back to land, where they would be processed, recycled, and reused, and not dumped back into the ocean.

The flaws of banning straws

The first thing that comes to many people's minds when they think about a straw ban is the video of a turtle with a straw stuck in its nose. While it is a sad and heart wrenching video, the truth of the matter is that much more harm is coming to the ocean ecosystem from other plastic waste.

That's not to say banning straws isn't a good idea. It's a smart idea in theory to try and get rid of plastics that are only used once, but straws account for a tiny number of the overall plastic waste. Straws only account for 0.03 percent of

the plastic in the ocean. They are a miniscule percentage of the ocean waste, so it's odd that they were singled out by many legislatures to pass laws about.

That's not to mention the U.S. only contributes about 1% of the world's plastic waste, so even a total removal of all the plastic straws in the U.S. would not make a dime's worth of a difference

Every year, an estimated 8 million tons of plastic waste is added to the ocean, and banning straws won't help. They are such a tiny part of the problem. The proposals to ban them are solely a way for people to feel like they are helping out, when in reality, it barely scratches the surface of plastic pollution.

Proposals for a straw ban have begun in many states. Local and state governments in New York, Hawaii, California, Washington, New Jersey, and Florida have started the process.

Many businesses have decided to join the ban on straws, like Starbucks, who announced a complete removal of all straws at their businesses, with a shift towards recyclable lids. What these bans fail to consider is that some people rely upon straws to be able to drink.

Many people with disabilities need straws to be able to drink beverages properly. Mobility impairments can limit their ability to drink beverages without using a straw, and alternatives just aren't viable. Paper straws are impractical for disabled people who take longer to drink, as they get soggy and are unusable rather quickly. Metal straws are impractical as well, as they are immovable, and therefore are unable to be bent by those with disabilities. Plastic straws are the only effective course of action.

The ban seems like a good idea in theory, but it has many flaws in its logic.

Many environmentalists believe that the fight has to start

somewhere, and that starting point is the straw ban. They believe it will spring many people to continue to care for the environment, but it's questionable as many people might give themselves a pass as they feel one action is enough for them to do their part.

There are more pressing issues with our consumption of plastic than straws. Politicians should focus on them instead of getting obsessed with trivial issues like plastic straws. Focus on plastic items that are much more damaging to the environment, like plastic bags, which many animals mistake for food, and fishing nets that can entrap marine life and kill them. Another more pressing issue are plastic bottles, which account for 7% of all plastic that washes up on beaches.

A straw ban may be a symbolic step in the right direction, but it definitely is not enough to stop our excessive use of plastic and it's unfair to plastic straws that they have been branded as a scapegoat.