



City of Homer

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Memorandum 20-028

TO: Mayor Castner and Homer City Council
FROM: Katie Koester, City Manager
DATE: February 5, 2020
SUBJECT: Ordinance 20-08: Removing bags labeled as biodegradable as a listed exception to the single-use carry out bag ban and defining compostable

Ordinance 20-08 removes a bag labeled as 'biodegradable' from the exceptions section of the single-use plastic bag ban and defines "compostable" in the Homer City Code 5.42.020 Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags Definitions section.

The need for clarification came to the attention of the Planning Department when a local retailer provided the Department with a thin plastic bag labelled as "biodegradable." The bag stated "49.28% BIODEGRADATION IN 900 DAYS UNDER NON-TYPICAL CONDITIONS. NO EVIDENCE OF FURTHER BIODEGRADATION, ASTM D5511." While one can debate this label meets the letter of the exception, it seems contrary to the voters' intent "to prohibit a seller from providing a buyer a single use plastic bag under 2.5 mils thick".

Other communities have avoided this problem by banning all plastic bags under a certain thickness (Soldotna), or banning all plastic bags entirely (Anchorage). However, the City of Homer has already provided retailers with materials indicating bags labelled as biodegradable and compostable are permissible. When researching how to address retailer concerns for clear guidelines on what is permissible under City Code, staff found no good testing method or widely used standard for the term biodegradable, which is why the attached ordinance recommends removing the term. However, the American Society of Testing Materials (ASTM) has developed a standard for "compostable" that is nationally recognized - a bag made of any material that meets the ASTM D6400 standard for breaking down in an industrial composting facility. This standard should be straightforward to identify and enforce. Nevertheless, it still requires an industrial composting facility, of which there are none in Alaska.

The attached publication from the Institute on Local Self-reliance has some good information for terminology and understanding the biodegradable/compostable issue (www.ilsr.org)

Enc:

"Compostable Bags: A Glance at What's Packed Inside the Bag"