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The greening of a Los Angeles street festival

By Tami Abdollah
August 24, 2008

Cheryl Revkin was sweating. She wore a white jumpsuit, green bonnet and 500 plastic bags covering her body as she stood in the middle of Sunset Junction Street Fair on Saturday.

But Revkin, president of the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce and a member of its Green Committee, was smiling as she walked through the crowd talking to people.

"I definitely feel like the message is getting out," Revkin said. In her hand she held a green sign that said "1 year, 1 shopper, 500 bags" – the average number of plastic bags a person uses in a year. Others also wore the costume.

The 28th annual Silver Lake street fair was also the first attempt by the community's roughly year-old Green Committee to present a more eco-friendly event.

The group's Zero Waste booth housed recycling bins and a compost bin, and its members handed out reusable bags, compostable food containers made of sugar cane pulp and potatoes, coffee mugs and energy-efficient light bulbs. The items sat next to white chairs with the words "Think Before You Toss" scrawled onto them.

In June, Green Committee members contacted the 20 food and drink vendors who planned to have booths at the fair, encouraging them to switch from polystyrene and plastic carry-out containers to biodegradable options. Two of the 20 agreed; many had already bought supplies for the year. About 10 of the 30 restaurants along the streets also joined in the effort.

"There are two vendors that responded to us this year, but I'm predicting by next year we'll have 50% doing it," Revkin said.

Bob Barrett and his brother Bill, of Huntington Beach, were the two vendors who agreed to join in the effort. Their businesses, Barrett's Lemonade and Foods and Mr. Goodburnz Foods, have been composting and recycling at various fairs for the last five to six years, said Bob Barrett, who heads Goodburnz, a bacon-wrapped hot dog business.

"We're using all paper products, no foil, no Styrofoam or anything like that, no plastics," Bob Barrett said.

On Santa Monica Boulevard at one of Bill Barrett's eight lemonade booths, Cameron McDonald served customers in cups made from corn oil. ("In the sun they'll melt really fast," he said. "They're very biodegradable.") A small green and white sign that read "Sunset Junction green vendor" topped the booth.

Yolanda Salas of Silver Lake stopped at the booth as she walked to her nearby book club for a cup of lemonade at Barrett's Old Fashioned Lemonade stand. She didn't even see the sign until after she paid \$4 for the large cup.

"It's a very good idea," Salas said. "I'm thirsty enough to pay for it."

But she also worried that the increased cost of compostable items will translate into higher costs for the consumer.

"It costs about 25 cents extra," Revkin said. "The good news is that a lot of the big takeout vendors ... now carry compostables for wholesale price, so it's getting more competitive."

A cup made of Styrofoam takes centuries to break down "if it ever does," said Meg Dickler-Taylor, co-chair of the Green Committee.

"While it is sitting in a landfill, if it even makes it to a landfill, it releases toxins," she said. "This is true of plastic bags as well. They both contain volatile organic compounds that leach into the soil or wherever they're located."

"We want people to think about what they're buying things in and to buy things that close the loop, instead of buying something and tossing it without being mindful."

As the fair got underway, committee members visited booths to remind people to bring their compost to the Zero Waste booth. The compost was then carted to a central bin and then "cooked" under high temperatures at Griffith Park. The free mulch that is created can be picked up to be used in backyards, said Ann Bradley, a committee member.

"We're here to say, 'zero waste,' we're here to say, 'Shift the way you conduct your lives,' " Bradley said. "We're here to say, 'Shift the way you conduct your business' ... It's not that hard."

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