



SUSTAINABILITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Mark O'Connor is Rising Above Plastics: A local environmental leader's story

Prepared by the Sustainability Advisory Committee

January 2024 marked the implementation of Del Mar's new [ordinance](#) banning the use, sale, and distribution of balloons filled with gasses lighter than air. The Sustainability Advisory Committee (SAC) identified a helium balloon ban in its FY23-24 work plan, and worked with staff to develop the ordinance. Staff reached out to neighboring cities and the [Surfrider Foundation of San Diego County](#) when developing its ordinance. Mark O'Connor, who volunteers with the Surfrider Foundation's [Rise Above Plastics](#) group, also assisted. In celebration of the balloon ordinance, Mark shared with Valérie Dufort-Roy of the SAC his journey to protect the environment.

Residents may be familiar with Mark from his advocacy for improving environmental practices at city council meetings around San Diego County. A local protector of the environment, Mark found his calling a decade ago, after retiring from the San Diego County Sheriff's Department. Rather than spending his retirement years lounging on beaches, Mark felt growing unease picking up more and more trash on local beaches, wondering, "Why is it here?"

Mark credits the birth of his grandson Nolan more than five years ago as the catalyst that drove him to join the Rise Above Plastics committee with the Surfrider Foundation. In between volunteering for monthly beach cleanups at Moonlight Beach and a personal goal to clean every beach from Mexico's border to the northern San Diego County limits, Mark is hard at work ensuring that each city in San Diego County has a plastic ordinance. Most recently, Mark has worked with the City of Carlsbad and its waste hauler to evaluate which takeout containers are compatible with green waste recycling.



Mark O'Connor at a recent SeaWorld Rescue Center behind-the-scenes tour event.

Mark points to several Styrofoam bans across the County, and an observed reduction in the amount of Styrofoam littering area beaches, as an example of effective ordinances: “[Bans] can work if people are diligent.” Mark advocates for alternatives to plastic packaging, too.

Mark has been working throughout the region to ensure that his grandchildren’s generation will have to worry less about plastics. His grandchildren are aware that “Papa is picking up plastic!” Several cities in the County have adopted ordinances and bans addressing single-use items by reducing the need to manufacture, sell or offer, use, and dispose of them. Del Mar has led efforts to decrease litter by banning expanded polystyrene and non-recyclable plastic food service wares, plastic straws and stirrers, and plastic carry-out bags. The helium balloon ban is part of an ongoing effort, led by the SAC and the City, to reduce plastic pollution that is harmful for the environment. Helium balloons, due to their frequent release into the atmosphere present a repeated risk of coastal pollution, negatively impacting the safety of local citizens, wildlife, oceans, coastlines, and communities. Additionally, helium is a non-renewable resource needed in science, industry, and medicine that is predicted to run out in the next decade.

In January, CBS 8 featured Mark and Del Mar’s balloon ban in a news story. Check out the video [here](#). For readers to learn more about the hazards of plastics, Mark recommends the National Educational Telecommunications Association documentary, *We Are Plastic People Now*, and the book, *A Poison Like No Other*.