

USGBC-LA Releases White Paper & Hosts Panel on “The Status of COVID-19 and Plastic Waste in L.A. and How to Maintain Momentum Towards a Circular Economy”

Second in White Paper Pandemic Series, Produced by USGBC-LA and its Committee of LA’s Top Sustainability Executives

Los Angeles, CA (April 22, 2021) – Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in immense changes to modern waste management systems, including significant increase in medical waste and residential solid waste, demand for household products, takeout dining, and personal protective equipment (PPE). The pandemic also increased plastic generation, and particularly single-use plastic waste. But many of the exacerbated problems were already happening prior to the pandemic. So now what? What are our next steps and is there an upside to how we come out of this year of isolation and overuse, and how we can benefit the health and wellbeing of our communities by addressing waste and a circular economy?

At 4:00pm PT on Thursday, April 29, the [Los Angeles Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council](#) (USGBC-LA) will host a panel presenting the findings in a white paper, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Plastic Waste Management in L.A.” **Registration is now open.** This will be the second paper/event in USGBC-LA’s **White Paper Pandemic Series** which is presenting three whitepapers from now through July, produced in collaboration with the organization’s LA Sustainability Executives Roundtable (LASER) committee, comprised of the region’s top corporate sustainability executives and leaders. USGBC-LA looks to provide regional environmental leadership around these issues of telecommuting (released Feb. 25), plastic waste (April 29), and carbon offsets (July 22) as we collectively work to emerge from the pandemic.

The panel discussion will be framed and moderated by Frances Anderton, host of the recent KCRW “Wasted” series focusing on a wide range of waste issues across southern California, with panelists from the City of Los Angeles, UCLA, and All About Waste.

There are many assumptions about waste and recycling that are a great deal more optimistic than the actual case. The recycling industry was already affected a few years prior to the pandemic due to the decreased demand overseas for used plastic materials, and the continued use of virgin plastic (from fossil fuels) in manufacturing. Most of the plastics we encounter follow a straight line from (single) use to the landfill, with the circular business model for plastics falling by the wayside. The pandemic brought newfound issues to the inadequacies of the waste industry, with massive amounts of PPE, with the shutdown of recycling plants, and with a demand for single-use plastics based on food takeout and the idea that plastic bags, etc., offered safety against the virus. With this in mind, the white paper explores:

- How COVID-19 shifted plastic consumption and management throughout the U.S., California, and Los Angeles (LA)

- How to reclaim the policy and educational progress made prior to the pandemic regarding the impact of plastics on our lives and our world
- What's needed in the short and long term to move towards a circular plastic economy.

Top Findings & Recommendations:

- Invest in infrastructure to support reuse practices in commercial buildings to reduce use of food-related single-use plastics, the most impactful plastic waste category in LA County. The TRUE zero waste rating system may be particularly useful for facilities to streamline more sustainable plastic waste management systems.
- Create public education campaigns to counter two false beliefs: 1) single-use plastics are safer than reusable alternatives and 2) all plastics accepted in our recycling bins actually get recycled.
- For longterm change, we must embrace innovative, circular models that make single-use plastic waste obsolete. A few worth noting are rental and deposit systems, bulk/refill stores, and waste-free vending machines.
- Government intervention will likely be necessary to fully shift to a circular plastics economy, with prominent policy ideas that include taxing virgin plastic, subsidizing recycled plastic, and investing in recycling technology. For example, the price of virgin plastic does not reflect the true cost of plastics' negative impacts on the environment and society (e.g., harm to marine ecosystems, GHG emissions, litter clean up), thus taxation could help raise funds to mitigate these impacts.

"While the pandemic has driven increases in plastic use, it has also provided us with this profound moment to pause and reassess the systems we use around waste in many of our office buildings, schools, and other facilities," states Ben Stapleton, USGBC-LA Executive Director. "We need to use this moment to shift systemic habits and policy while investing in infrastructure to not just maintain momentum but to accelerate our progress towards a circular economy."

Download the white paper [HERE](#), and register for the April 29 panel [HERE](#).

To learn more about the prior Telecommuting white paper, please click [HERE](#).

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About U.S. Green Building Council-Los Angeles

Founded in 2002, USGBC-LA is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization committed to creating a prosperous and sustainable future within one generation. Our mission is to accelerate all aspects of sustainability in the built environment by delivering access to knowledge, resources, recognition and networking. *Learn, Share and Lead Green.* (www.usgbc-la.org)