

Pandemic litter plaguing our public spaces



A discarded face mask and cigarette butt litter the sidewalk outside the Eastern Market in Washington. (Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo)

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Municipal garbage collection started in the late 1800s as means of preventing the spread of disease. This service was instituted for the sake of public health, not convenience. Today, it's something many of us take for granted.

This bit of history is worth remembering when it comes to dealing with a new problem that has arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Used face masks and disposable gloves, after protecting us from the spread of COVID-19, are too often ending up on the ground instead of in the trash where they belong. During a recent walk along Ocean Avenue in New London, used face masks were found lying on the sidewalk, near a park bench and hung up in some bushes, and blue plastic gloves stood out against the grassy meridian on one of the side streets.

When mindlessly discarded, these items pollute the outdoor spaces so many of us are appreciating more than ever these days. This careless action also turns the very thing that helped guard against disease into a potential health hazard. COVID-19 germs have been shown to persist on surfaces, creating a small but not insignificant risk of transmission if someone picks up a mask tossed on the ground by someone who was infected.

“We all must realize that proper disposal of PPEs (personal protective equipment) is a common courtesy and is clearly important for the sake of public health during this pandemic,” said Pamela Roach, president of the Connecticut Recyclers Coalition. “Proper disposal assures that PPEs don’t contaminate recyclables and prevents a public health issue for sanitation workers and others. They should be removed carefully and disposed of in the regular trash.”

During the fourth year of the #DontTrashLISound campaign by the Long Island Sound Study, Connecticut Sea Grant, Mystic Aquarium and other groups that began Aug. 3 and continues through Sept. 19 (International Coastal Cleanup Day), organizers called attention to the new issue of PPE litter. While single-use plastic use that has been the campaign’s focus is still the main culprit polluting the Sound and the waterways that flow into it, face masks and gloves are a new threat that everyone can help eliminate by simply using the trash can.

“We don’t want a public health crisis to contribute to a public waste crisis,” said Louis Rosado Burch, Connecticut program director for the Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

There are efforts being made to recycle the N95 face masks health care workers need, and some people are opting for homemade or commercially

produced cloth masks that are washable. But many people are relying on synthetic fiber masks meant to be thrown out after just a few uses, and too many of these are being cast off in our public spaces. Or they're being thrown in with recyclables where they don't belong, passing along the task of proper disposal to the workers who sort the cans and bottles from the cardboard. The problem even came to the attention of former state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Commissioner Rob Klee, now a Yale University lecturer. He recently devoted a portion of a webinar about environmental issues in the pandemic to what he called "the increase in PPE litter everywhere."

Just as by wearing a mask we protect others along with ourselves, disposing of masks properly also protects other people, along with the environment, he noted.

"You're not just protecting yourself," Klee said. "And masks that end up on the curbside will wash into storm drains and rivers and clog sewers."

Or, as the oft repeated saying goes, "If it goes on the ground, it goes in the Sound."

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