



Community Environmental Advisory Commission

CONSENT CALENDAR  
November 17, 2009

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Community Environmental Advisory Commission (CEAC)  
Submitted by: Nabil Al-Hadithy, Secretary, Community Environmental Advisory Commission  
Subject: Balloons – Environmental Impacts

RECOMMENDATION

Declare that balloons pose environmental and other physical hazards when released into the environment. Council requests the City Manager to include a clause prohibiting the release of balloons in special event permits issued by the City. Finally, Council requests staff to work with the CEAC to provide educational material in the form of a leaflet to educate event organizers, businesses and schools at special events or other public gatherings and at point of sale outlets.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

Minimal impacts - primarily cost to prepare and disseminate an educational leaflet and revise some permit language.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Berkeley's proximity to the Bay makes it important for the City to be careful about what is freely discharged into the atmosphere. Plastic and latex balloons are associated with the death of dolphins, whales, turtles, fish, sea birds and even land animals. Furthermore, metal-based balloons, such as Mylar and foil, are known to cause shorts when they connect the circuit between two power lines and could even cause a blackout. Currently, there are no rulings to protect the marine animals from ingesting balloons. However, many states have adopted rulings on release of balloons with metallic components to protect electrical grids, aircraft etc.

BACKGROUND

On October 21, 2008, the City Council referred the impacts of Helium balloons on the environment to the CEAC. On June 4, 2009, the CEAC voted as follows: Motioned, Seconded, Passed (MacKusick/Harris. For: Clear, Harris, Kim, Leventis, MacKusick, Thompson. Absent: Murthy. Against: None. Abstain: None.) Staff to provide educational materials to event organizers, businesses, schools, point of sale and the public on the harmful effects and remedies as result of releasing balloons into the environment and remedies. Consider including a clause in permits for public gatherings prohibiting the release of balloons, and require applicants to state proper disposal methods.

It is unacceptable to toss trash onto the street or into the Bay. However, releasing Helium balloons, some of which will eventually end up on streets and in the water, is not seen as littering. Releasing Helium balloons is the equivalent of throwing them directly into the Bay or being transported in the stormwater sewers into the Bay.

#### *Danger to Wildlife – Balloons*

Although 90-95% rise high into the atmosphere and explode into small pieces, 5-10% fall back to the earth's surface whole<sup>1</sup>, especially if they have an attachment weighing them down or if they are not completely inflated. After several days, balloons lose their Helium, and thus their lift, bringing them back down if they have not exploded. Even the pieces of exploded balloons fall back to earth.

In the water, these balloons can be mistaken for jellyfish, squid or other food for sea life. Ingestion of a partly inflated balloon can block the digestive tract and lead to painful starvation. Only one of these materials, latex, is biodegradable and dissolves in water, but in cold water this could take up to six months, leaving ample time for it to harm of wildlife.

#### *Danger to Wildlife – Cords*

Furthermore, cords tied to balloons present their own problems. These cords can entangle birds.

#### *Hazard for Power Lines*

Finally, balloons made of foil have been known to float into power lines, causing power outages. According to California utility companies, these outages happened more than 800 times in 2007. These outages can be simple shorts or as bad as blackouts. When this phenomenon occurs, the balloon often melts onto the power line, creating a dangerous situation for utility workers who must remove the melted balloons<sup>2</sup>. PG&E regularly advertises against release of metallic balloons during graduations and Mother's Day celebrations. In 2008, Sen. Jack Scott (D-Altadena) attempted legislation to ban Helium filled balloons; including a financial penalty and registering it as a misdemeanor.

#### RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Although the CEAC does not oppose the use of balloons nor want to ruin an amusement for people, the wanton release of balloons into the air is tantamount to dumping a harmful material for sea life directly into the Bay. Furthermore, letting loose Mylar or foil balloons presents the risk of shorts, blackouts and possible injury for utility workers who must remove melted balloons from power lines. Balloons can be enjoyed without watching them float away indiscriminately into the sky. A prohibition on the

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<sup>1</sup> "Balloon releases: pollution fact sheet", Marine Conservation Society flyer, reprinted 12.5.06.

<sup>2</sup> "California Targets New Menace: Helium-Filled Foil Balloons", Amy Kaufman, Wall Street Journal, 7.15.08

release of balloons in special event permits issued by the City is therefore a reasonable step to take in order to significantly diminish the occurrence of these negative results.

The City should note the prohibition on the release of balloons in special event permits issued and provide approved methods for balloon handling in a leaflet to be worked upon with CEAC members. The approved leaflets should be disseminated with all event-planning guides and issued permits as applicable. Such permits are issued by Berkeley Public Works, Parks, Recreation and Waterfront as well as by the Health Department.

#### ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

Alternative measures considered were a ban on balloons or a prohibition on the materials used to make the balloons. A ban on balloons is extreme: they provide enjoyment, are a traditional part of American celebrations and, if properly handled and disposed of, should present no harm to wildlife and no risk of utility interruption. Outlawing plastics, latex, Mylar or foil would be beyond the scope or desire of the City.

#### CITY MANAGER

No objections to these recommendations.

#### CONTACT PERSON

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