February 9, 2021

The Honorable Charles Baker, Governor of Massachusetts
Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Katie Theoharides
Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection Martin Suuberg

Dear Governor, Secretary, and Commissioner:

As you know, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection is in the midst of finalizing the Commonwealth’s 2020-2030 Solid Waste Master Plan (SWMP), which will create the blueprint for managing waste in Massachusetts for the next 10 years. In short, the draft plan that was released in October 2019 profoundly misses the mark, and we write to implore you to make its improvement a top priority of your administration.

Our four organizations joined in coalition in 2008, when the 2010-2020 SWMP was being drafted. That year, we sat in a meeting room with then Commissioner Laurie Burt and MassDEP senior staff, and asked them to consider drafting a zero waste master plan, rather than just the next solid waste master plan. While we knew it was an ambitious goal, we also knew that our state was mired in a century of inertia, committed to a disposal system whose infrastructure was fatally flawed -- landfills leaking toxic pollutants, incinerators belching toxics, precious land despoiled, and the degradation of public health for residents living nearby these 22 facilities from North Adams to Bourne. We also knew that here in the United States, and in countries around the world, the term ‘zero waste’ was evolving from an aspirational ideal to enacted public policy. While our advocacy helped to improve the draft plan ten years ago, the final 2010-2020 blueprint for our waste lacked the commitment to zero waste we sought. As a result, waste disposal over the last ten years has not significantly changed or decreased appreciatively.

Now, in 2021, there is good news and bad news.

The good news is, the public policy goal of zero waste is much more widely accepted and in some cities, towns and countries firmly in place. To wit:

- Boston adopted a Zero Waste Plan in 2019 and commercial, institutional, and residential composting programs are spreading across the region.

- San Francisco, Austin, Los Angeles, Germany, Sweden and Nova Scotia are just some of the places making significant progress towards their policy goal of zero waste.

- The people of the Commonwealth have spoken from over 175 of the 351 cities and towns, with local votes to ban single use plastic bags, styrene, straws, and other forms of waste that pollute and degrade our health and environment. Over a dozen towns in Massachusetts have also banned single serve plastic bottled water.

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- The staff of the DEP have proposed and enacted regulations, such as the beginning of food waste diversion, a disposal ban on textiles, and a disposal ban on mattresses.

Of course there’s more but we need to get on to the bad news. We are nowhere near even the modest goals set by the 2010-2020 SWMP, and we are the worse for it:

- We have spent much of the last decade fighting the unthinkable pollution coming from the incinerator in Saugus, the attempt to expand an already toxic landfill in Southbridge, and the influence of ‘waste management’ companies that profit more from burning and burying our waste than reduction, reuse and recycling.

- We have contended with the lobbyists for the American Beverage Association, American Chemistry Council, American Recyclable Plastic Bag Alliance and others who have consistently fought our efforts to reduce waste, the tens of millions of dollars spent by major industry on our statewide ballot and legislative efforts to expand recycling, and with the pandemic, the onslaught of advertising and PR that has falsely equated ‘single use’ with hygienic and set our waste reduction efforts back considerably.

- Take a look around Springfield, Saugus, Southbridge, or any other of the 22 cities and towns which host a landfill or incinerator, and you will find a myriad of residents’ health problems that is flat out unacceptable

 Whether your concern is environmental preservation, public health, equity, municipal budgets, a sustainable economy, or climate change--academic studies have documented that disposal of garbage is the third leading cause of climate change, according to the Trash in America Report by the Frontier Group. We can and should do nothing less than make zero waste our policy goal for 2030. We’ve stalled out in some categories, or worse-been subject to the influence of the garbage industry when they do things like re-brand incinerators as ‘waste to energy facilities. The draft plan issued in the fall of 2019 does not go nearly far enough in turning this sinking ship of garbage around and onto a different path. In fact it goes the wrong direction by allowing the expansion of incinerator capacity.

The people of Massachusetts want to adopt more sustainable waste systems. When the DEP staff graciously allowed for our request of additional public hearings on Zoom this summer, the citizens of many cities and towns showed up to share both their grief at living near dirty disposal facilities, and their convictions and commitment to be part of reducing waste. Furthermore, the cities and towns of the Commonwealth cannot afford to operate unless we reduce waste and reform our recycling system. The planet needs us to reduce waste to fight climate change and reduce toxicity in the environment. The policy path to get to zero waste is clear and doable, we simply need your leadership to put us on it.

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