Durable versus Disposable

You have been assigned to purchase plates, cups and silverware for the breakroom or the office party. Should you use durable goods or disposable? If you have to use disposables which should you use: Styrofoam, plastic, plant-based biodegradables or paper? Is recycling a paper or plastic product more eco-friendly than sending a biodegradable product to the landfill? These are tough questions faced by businesses and residents in our City. Below are some of the options and the pros and cons of each.

Durable to Disposable: (from best to worst in terms of environmental impact)

Durable Goods (ceramic, porcelain, reusable plastic, glass, stainless steel, etc.)
Pros: Reusable. More cost effective than disposables if used for a long time.
Cons: Require energy and water in cleaning process (energy efficient dishwashers and biodegradable soaps diminish impact somewhat). Are more expensive at time of purchase.

Sugarcane based products (Bagasse)
Pros: Made from secondary waste product (post industrial). Biodegradable in a commercial compost setting.
Cons: Must be imported from sugarcane producing locations (tropics) which means significant shipping costs and carbon footprint. Because the composting facility in Salt Lake will not accept these containers, they must be sent to the landfill where they break down anaerobically. Anaerobic decomposition releases methane gas into the atmosphere which contributes to global warming.
Brand Names: Eco-Products, StalkMarket, Ultra Green, Genpak

Biodegradable Corn Plastic or PLA (polylactic acid)
Pros: Made of renewable resource (corn) and compostable. Also available in foam form ("Starch foam").
Cons: Because the composting facility in Salt Lake will not accept these containers, they must be sent to the landfill where they break down anaerobically. Anaerobic decomposition releases methane gas into the atmosphere which contributes to global warming. Additionally, monoculture crops are more vulnerable to disease. Crops used to produce biofuel and other non-food products can threaten food security especially in developing world countries.
Brand Names: Eco-Products, World Centric, Ultra Green, Fabri-Kal, BioBags, Natural Value, TerraWare, Pactiv, Genpak, Trellis Earth, Biological

Paper products
Pros: Can be recycled and decompose faster than plastic cups if put into the landfill. Can be made with post consumer content.
Cons: Our demand for paper products has begun depleting our forests, which an important resource for sequestering carbon found in the atmosphere. It can be hard for a consumer to distinguish between paper and paper cups with a plastic lining or wax coating (which aren't recyclable everywhere). If soaked with grease or other liquid they are no longer recyclable. When these containers are sent to the landfill they break down anaerobically. Anaerobic decomposition releases methane gas into the atmosphere which contributes to global warming.
Brand Names: Chinet, Starbucks, Eco-Products, Seventh Generation, Natural Value, Field Day, Marcal, International Paper (Ecotainer), Bio-Plus Terra, Pactiv, Paterson paper, Georgia Pacific, Fold-Pak & SCA/Tork, Green Source

Plastic with recycled content (preferably "post consumer" rather than "post industrial")
Pros: Can be recycled, and made with recycled content, therefore supporting the recycling loop. Reusable options are available which are dishwasher safe.
Cons: Plastic is a petroleum-based product, which is not renewable. Plastic can leach hormone mimicking chemicals into our bodies.
Brand Names: Eco-Products, Preserve, Natural Value, Nature Saver, Seventh Generation

Styrofoam (not recommended)
Pros: Lightweight and cheap
Cons: Generally made with hydrofluorocarbons (HFC) which deplete the ozone and have a significant effect on global warming. Styrene leaches into beverages and food and has neurotoxic effects on our bodies. Does not decompose in the landfill. Is not recycled locally.

Locally-Owned Sources for Eco-friendly disposables:

Plates, cups, bowls, utensils, lids, napkins, to go containers, straws, stirrers, etc.

Cali's Natural Foods (Large quantities)
389 West 1700 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84115
801 483-2254
www.calisnaturalfoods.com
Available Products: Eco-Products, Biological, Green Source, Fold-pak, Seventh Generation and Trellis Earth

Earth Goods General Store (Small quantities)
1249 S 900 E
Salt Lake City, UT 84105
801 746-4410
www.earthgoodsgeneralstore.com
Available Products: Reusable plastics, stainless steel and glass, Recycled paper goods, Eco-Products and other biodegradable options, reuseable/biodegradable "Fallen Leaf" and bamboo foodservice products from VerTerra, Bambu, ToGo Ware, et. al.

Nicholas & Company Foodservice Distributor (Large quantities)
5520 West Harold Gatty Dr.
Salt Lake City, UT 84116
801 531-1100
www.nicholasandco.com
Available Products: Eco-Products, Fabri-Kal, Pactiv, Genpak, Trellis Earth, Paterson paper, Georgia Pacific, Fold-Pak, SCA/Tork, StalkMarket

Other Sources: Whole Foods, Costco, Sysco