

Joint Comments from Fairfax Healthy Communities Network on Plastic Bag Fee

September 7, 2021

AUDUBON NATURALIST SOCIETY • AUDUBON SOCIETY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA •
CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION • CHESAPEAKE CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK •
COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH • FAITH ALLIANCE FOR CLIMATE SOLUTIONS •
FRIENDS OF HOLMES RUN • NORTHERN VIRGINIA AFFORDABLE HOUSING ALLIANCE •
SIERRA CLUB GREAT FALLS GROUP • SOUTH COUNTY TASK FORCE •
VIRGINIA LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS

Dear Chairman McKay & and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

The above named organizations, as part of the **Fairfax Healthy Communities Network**, are excited to support the County's initiative to institute a fee for plastic bag usage in the County, per state authority.

Our network partners envision a Fairfax County where people can live, work, and play in connected communities that are healthy, sustainable, and inclusive. Helping to surface the true cost of single-use plastic bags¹ by instituting a fee will remind people to change their behavior and generate much needed funds to provide reusable bags to those who need them and to fund clean ups of our waterways. Cleaner waterways will help make our communities more sustainable and healthier.

Plastic bags harm our communities

In 2019, single-use plastics accounted for 40 percent of the plastic produced every year, with many of these products, such as plastic bags, having a usable lifespan of minutes to hours.² And yet, these fossil fuel-based, discarded plastic products persist in our natural environment for hundreds of years.

Single-use plastic bags too frequently end up as litter and make their way into our waterways. They get eaten by, and subsequently can kill wildlife³ and eventually degrade into smaller pieces. This microplastic is also inadvertently consumed by creatures living in the water, by us through our water supply, and via food we eat (e.g. fish), creating a public health concern⁴.

Plastics are the scourge of our local waterways. According to the Chesapeake Bay Program: "To date, the U.S. Geological Survey has found microplastics in all samples taken at nontidal stations

¹ Sierra Club testimony: <https://www.sierraclub.org/maine/blog/2017/04/true-costs-single-use-plastic-bags>

² National Geographic: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/plastic-pollution>

³ 10 Facts About Single Use Plastic Bags:

https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/sustainability/plastic_bag_facts.html and Plastics Post an Enduring Threat to Seabirds:

<https://abcbirds.org/plastics-pose-an-enduring-threat-to-seabirds/>

⁴ NIH: Microplastics in Seafood and the Implications for Human Health:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6132564/>

in the Chesapeake watershed. This means that microplastics are not only in our bay, they are all throughout our rivers and streams.”⁵

Bag fees reduce plastic pollution

Plastic bag fees provide a mechanism to begin to turn off the plastic bag spigot, so to speak. Charging a fee disincentivizes their use, and in doing so, minimizes the resulting pollution in our communities and waterways (and therefore, in *us*). This new ordinance would only apply to grocery stores (including stores like Target and Walmart that sell groceries), drug stores and convenience stores - it's not *all* plastic bags, but it's a good start.

Five cents will only be charged to people who choose to use single-use plastic bags,⁶ which means this tax (by name) operates more like a fee⁷ rather than a blanket tax which all residents pay. Should shoppers opt to use a plastic bag, the resulting funding generated by the fee will either go directly to help mitigate pollution (e.g. environmental cleanup, providing education programs designed to reduce environmental waste, mitigating pollution and litter) or to provide reusable bags to those who need them most.

Businesses will benefit more if this ordinance is passed sooner

Instituting this ordinance sooner rather than later not only helps the environment, but it also provides assistance to businesses. According to the enabling legislation, businesses are compensated for the cost of collecting, accounting for, and remitting the fee but the amount from which they benefit decreases over time. Passing this ordinance now to allow it to go into effect in January 2022 means that dealers will have a full year of retaining two cents (\$0.02) of fee, whereas starting in 2023, the amount businesses can retain drops to one cent (\$0.01).

Ensure this plastic bag fee does not disproportionately harm vulnerable communities

For each decision the County makes, the One Fairfax policy helps to surface the questions “Who does this help? Who does this harm?” As the County considers implementation, we urge the County to ensure this plastic bag fee does not disproportionately harm vulnerable communities. For example, we urge the County to proactively provide reusable bags to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) recipients so the plastic bag fee doesn't burden vulnerable communities. Similarly, we ask that reusable bags be distributed at food banks offered by the County and its non-profit partners. Bags could be printed with the County helpline number and other information useful to vulnerable families.

The enabling legislation⁸ does allow for potential revenue from this fee to go towards providing reusable bags to recipients of SNAP or WIC benefits, and we ask the County to prioritize this goal. However, regardless of the funds generated through the fee, reusable bags must be made available to the people who need them the most.

⁵ Small plastics are a big problem:

https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog/small_plastics_are_a_big_problem

⁶ This fee will only apply to a subset of single use plastic bags as defined by the state code.

⁷ Difference between tax and fee: <https://qsstudy.com/business-studies/main-difference-tax-fee>

⁸ Virginia state code: <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?201+ful+CHAP1022+pdf>

One example we urge Fairfax County to follow is what has been done in DC to ensure reusable bags are easy to get for their most vulnerable residents. Washington DC's Department of Energy & Environment partners with grocery and drug stores, District Government agencies, Council offices, and community service organizations to give away tens of thousands of bags to low-income and senior District residents⁹. They also provide contact information for how to request a reusable bag on their website.

Summary

Neighboring jurisdictions in DC and MD have already taken this important step in incentivizing plastic bag alternatives, and the positive results seen via cleaner communities and cleaner waterways are impressive. The Alice Ferguson Foundation reported a 72% reduction in plastic bags found along the Anacostia River once Washington DC's bag fee was in place. Similarly, in Montgomery County, MD, they also reported a 65% reduction in plastic bags found at cleanups once the bag fee was in place.

In the Commonwealth, the City of Roanoke was the first to pass the institution of a bag fee¹⁰, which goes into effect in January 2022. Fairfax County's process has benefited from Roanoke's experience and the resulting guidelines the Commonwealth has provided.

Now is the time for Fairfax County to take advantage of the Commonwealth's enabling legislation and institute a bag fee.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Audubon Naturalist Society, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate
Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, Tom Blackburn, President
Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Ann Jurczyk, Virginia Director of Outreach and Advocacy
Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Zander Pellegrino, Northern VA Organizer
Coalition for Smarter Growth, Sonya Breehey, Northern Virginia Advocacy Manager
Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Andrea McGimsey, Executive Director
Friends of Holmes Run, Whitney Redding, Primary Conservator
Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Michelle Krockner, Executive Director
Sierra Club Great Falls Group, Susan Bonney, Chair
South County Task Force, Mary Paden, Chair
Virginia League of Conservation Voters, Mike Town, Executive Director

⁹ DOEE's plastic bag FAQ: <https://doee.dc.gov/page/bag-law-faqs>

¹⁰ Roanoke passes plastic bag fee:

<https://wset.com/news/local/roanoke-city-leaders-first-in-virginia-to-pass-plastic-shopping-bag-tax-to-reduce-litter>