



## Moving Away from Single-Use Plastic Bags

by Dean Amel

On September 18, Alexandria and Arlington joined Fairfax County, which had acted a few days earlier, to impose a five-cent fee on single-use plastic bags at grocery, convenience and drug stores. While Falls Church had not taken the same step as of this writing, the city is expected to join its neighbors soon.

While the local ordinances are limited in scope, they go as far as jurisdictions are permitted to go under legislation passed in 2020 by the Virginia General Assembly. The state law authorizes any county or city in Virginia to impose a fee of five cents per bag on disposable plastic bags provided to customers by convenience stores, drugstores and grocery stores. The fee isn't applied to reusable plastic bags or to bags used to wrap, contain or package certain items like ice cream, meat, fish, poultry, produce, unwrapped bulk food items or perishable food items.

The Sierra Club and other environmental groups had hoped for a broader bill. Some localities have banned single-use plastic bags rather than just imposing a fee for their use. Some places have imposed fees on both plastic and paper bags that are meant for a single use. Single-use paper bags are responsible for roughly the same amount of greenhouse gases in their production as are single-use plastic bags. However, in other ways plastic bags are clearly the bigger problem. They are a much more long-lasting and visible presence in the form of litter; they eventually break down into tiny pieces that are now ubiquitous in the food chain of humans and many other creatures; and they produce toxic emissions when they are burned in waste incinerators.

The fee will take effect on January 1, 2022, in Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax. Until January 1, 2023, retailers affected by the fee will be able to retain two cents of every five cents collected. After January 1, 2023, the amount will decrease to one cent. According to the state legislation, money collected by local jurisdictions can be used for several purposes: environmental cleanups; providing educational programs designed to reduce environmental waste, mitigating pollution and litter; and providing reusable bags to recipients of either Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Women, Infants, and Children Program benefits. Potomac River Group

members will be monitoring Alexandria's and Arlington's plans for the funds to make sure they are put to good use.

*This content originally appeared in the November 2021 issue of the Potomac River Group's quarterly newsletter. Opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect official positions of the PRG or the Sierra Club. For more information about the Potomac River Group, please visit [sierraclub.org/virginia/potomac-river/](https://sierraclub.org/virginia/potomac-river/)*