



Prince George's County: Bring your own bag!

Did You Know?

The world is facing a plastic pollution crisis. Every year, our oceans take in an estimated 5 million to 13 million tons of plastic from land-based sources.¹ On our present course, there will be more plastic than fish (by weight) in the oceans by 2050.²

Worldwide, shoppers use each year an estimated 1 trillion plastic shopping bags.³ Shoppers in Prince George's County use an estimated 323 million plastic bags annually. These bags are among the top five plastic products collected in beach cleanups in the U.S.⁴ At major grocery chains in Maryland that provide carryout bags, 75% to 89% of shoppers use single-use bags, nearly all of them plastic.⁵ In Prince George's County in 2019, only 6% of grocery shoppers were using reusable bags; 88% were using single-use plastic carryout bags.⁶ These bags have about a 15-minute "working life," but persist in the environment beyond our lifetimes.

Plastic bags pollute our waterways and pose a threat to wildlife and human health.

- Littered plastic bags end up in waterways, the Chesapeake, and the ocean, where they break up into small pieces and absorb toxic chemicals.
- Whether intact or as microplastic, plastic shopping bags are ingested by marine life, injuring and killing fish, seabirds, and marine mammals. On land, plastic bag litter is a lethal threat to livestock and wildlife.
- Scientists estimate that people are ingesting as much as a credit card's worth of plastic weekly. The health effects on humans of microplastics, their additives, and the toxins they absorb are concerning.



Photo credit: Shutterstock

Plastic bag laws change shopper expectations and behavior, and reduce plastic pollution. Eleven states and more than 500 localities in the U.S. have enacted plastic bag laws, including Delaware.⁷ Locally, four municipalities have banned plastic carryout bags (Chestertown, Laurel, Takoma Park, Westminster); Montgomery and Howard counties have taxed carryout bags. A third set of jurisdictions has adopted a "hybrid" policy, banning plastic carryout bags and either taxing other carryout bags (Baltimore City, 5¢) or requiring retailers to charge and retain at least 10¢ for other carryout bags (Baltimore County, College Park, Easton, Salisbury) to encourage shoppers to bring their own bag or not take a bag.

Hybrid plastic bag policies have proven most effective in shifting shoppers from accepting plastic and single-use paper bags to bringing reusable bags or taking no bag:

- After Baltimore's ban on plastic carryout bags and 5¢ surcharge on paper bags went into effect, the share of shoppers using a reusable bag or no bag rose from 19% to 65%.⁸
- In San Jose, CA, a ban on thin plastic bags and a mandatory 10¢ minimum charge on paper bags (kept by the retailer) increased shoppers' reusable bag use from 3% to 46%, and the share that took no bag from 13% to 43%.⁹ Plastic bags in waterways declined by 76%.

It's time for Prince George's County to incentivize reusable bags!

What the Better Bag Bill (CB-32-2023) Would Do:

It would **reduce plastic pollution** and **change behavior** by...

- Prohibiting retailers from providing single-use plastic carryout bags to customers at the point of sale;
- Requiring retailers to charge at least 10 cents for other carryout bags and to record customers' bag charges on receipts, just as they do for other merchandise. Retailers retain the revenue to pay for the bags. It is not a tax: no revenue goes to the government;
- Promoting use of reusable bags and requiring retailers to post the carryout bag policy in many languages at checkout.

The bill would go into effect after a 6-month public education campaign and distribution of reusable bags to those in greatest need. It responds directly to the County's Climate Action Plan recommendation M-10 to reduce waste and ban plastic carryout bags.¹⁰



Allentown Road near Camp Springs
Photo: Terry Stakem

Why Not Just Recycle Plastic Bags?

Only about 5% of plastic bags are recycled. They are not accepted in curbside recycling programs because they foul the machinery and are too contaminated to be marketed. Even if the recycling rate could be improved, it would not prevent littered plastic bags from entering the environment. The best solution is to ban provision of single-use plastic carryout bags and incentivize use of reusable bags by requiring stores to charge for paper and other bags.

Why Charge for Paper Bags?

Charging for other single-use bags is a financial incentive to switch to reusable bags. Shoppers may avoid paying by simply by bringing their own bag. The manufacture of paper bags results in millions of trees being cut down each year and relies on toxic polluting chemicals; after use, paper bags typically enter our growing waste stream.

Paper and plastic carryout bags are not “free” to shoppers. Their cost is part of stores’ overhead, a hidden cost embedded in the price of merchandise. The bill will reduce stores’ overhead; shoppers who want a paper carryout bag will pay for it, just as they pay for other merchandise, and those who bring their own bag will not. The charge is not a tax.

Some Prince George’s County grocery chains already do not offer plastic carryout bags and charge for other bags. Aldi and Lidl grocery stores in Prince George’s County do not offer single-use plastic carryout bags and charge 12¢ for paper and reusable carryout bags: 48% of shoppers bring their own bag, 46% take no bag, and only 4% take a disposable bag.¹¹ Several big box stores offer no bags. Their customers benefit from lower prices for food and merchandise, since removing the cost of “free” carryout bags lowers the stores’ overhead.

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¹ Jambeck, Jenna *et al.* 2015. “Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean,” *Science* 347, no. 6223:768-771.

² <https://www.weforum.org/press/2016/01/more-plastic-than-fish-in-the-ocean-by-2050-report-offers-blueprint-for-change/>.

³ Laura Parker. 2018. “Plastic: We made it. We depend on it. We’re drowning in it,” *National Geographic*, June, p. 40.

⁴ 5 Gyres Institute *et al.* Undated. “Better Alternatives Now: B.A.N. List 2.0.” Los Angeles, California.

⁵ MD Sierra Club Shopper Surveys, 2019-2021 in 15 counties and the City of Baltimore.

⁶ MD Sierra Club, 2019 Shopper Survey of Prince George’s County (48 grocery stores, 7,694 shoppers).

⁷ CA, CO, CT, DE, ME, NJ, NY, OR, RI, VT, and WA have statewide plastic bag laws; HI has a de facto statewide law because all counties have adopted ordinances.

⁸ In three grocery chains - Giant, Harris Teeter, Shoppers.

⁹ <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/environment/illegal-dumping-litter/bring-your-own-bag-ordinance>.

¹⁰ Prince George’s County Climate Action Commission. 2022. *Draft Climate Action Plan*. p. 91.

¹¹ MD Sierra Club 2019 Shopper Survey, results for 13 Aldi and Lidl stores in Prince George’s County (1,550 shoppers). Two percent of shoppers use single-use plastic bags that they brought with them.