

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 13, 2020

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR, MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: COUNCILMAN MO SEIFELDEIN

SUBJECT: DISPOSABLE PLASTIC BAG ASSESSMENT

In an effort to reduce our environmental footprint and achieve the goals of our Environmental Action Plan 2040, Alexandria should reconsider our regulations on the usage of plastic bags.

Proposed Virginia House Bill 534 grants localities the ability to impose a disposable plastic bag assessment of \$0.05 for every plastic bag provided by retailers to consumers, allowing the retailer to retain \$0.01 from every \$0.05 collected. This bill exempts taxation on reusable, durable plastic bags, plastic bags used to carry ice cream, meat, fish, poultry, leftover restaurant food, newspapers, dry cleaning, alcoholic beverages, and prescription drugs. Additionally, the bill excludes packaged garbage bags, pet waste bags, and leaf collection bags. Funds collected from this assessment are to be used for the purpose of pollution and litter mitigation.¹

Instituting a modest assessment of \$0.05 per bag in Alexandria would benefit ecological initiatives and introduce an incentive to decrease our dependence on plastic. Plastic bags are one of the most prevalent sources of trash found in bodies of water and have a drastic impact on fish and wild-life populations.² Not only is the disposal of plastic bags a detriment to the environment, the production process is as well. The production of plastic bags exacerbates the usage of fossil fuel resources and disperses hazardous chemicals.³

To mitigate this, many jurisdictions including The District of Columbia and various localities in Maryland have implemented similar measures.⁴ The District of Columbia's Department of Energy and Environment implemented this assessment in 2009 and found that 80% of residents decreased their disposable bag usage, 79% of retailers saw a decrease in their disposable bag distribution, and that there was an overall decrease in littering.⁵ Since 2010, \$19 million in revenue has been collected from the bag fee and used towards the planting of trees, installation of river barrels, and the restoration of streams.⁶

¹ [House Bill No. 534. "Disposable Plastic Bag Tax."](#)

² [Potomac Conservatory. "The Potomac is Trashed with Plastic Litter."](#)

³ [Greenliving. "Are Plastic Shopping Bags a Problem in our Environment?"](#)

⁴ [The Baltimore Sun. "Baltimore City Council approves bill to ban retailers' use of plastic bags, set 5-cent fee per paper bag."](#)

⁵ [D.C. Department of Energy and Environment. "Purpose and Impact of the Bag Law."](#)

⁶ [D.C. Department of Energy and Environment. "5 Cent Bag Fee by the Numbers."](#)

Virginia is lagging ten years behind the District of Columbia in this case.⁷ I welcome your feedback and support regarding this matter. In anticipation that H.B. 534 will pass in the General Assembly, I would like to us to be ready to take advantage of this. I will ask the City Attorney to provide us with recommendations and an ordinance draft.

cc: Mark B. Jinks, City Manager

Joanna Anderson, City Attorney

Gloria Sitton, City Clerk

Kendel Taylor, Director, Department of Finance

Praveen Kathpal, Chair, Environmental Policy Commission

⁷ Personally, I wish that this had given us the authority to ban non-reusable plastic bags instead of placing an assessment on them. However, we will work with the tools we have.