



April 13, 2020

The Honorable Montgomery County Council President and Council Members
Office Building 100 Maryland Avenue Rockville, MD 20850

Expedited Bill 17-20, Carryout Bag Tax – Suspension

Dear Council President Katz and Honorable Members of the Montgomery County Council,

Environment Maryland is a statewide, citizen-based environmental advocacy organization working for clean air, clean water and open space. Last summer, Environment Maryland staff knocked on 15,000 doors in Montgomery County and across the state to talk to Marylanders about plastic pollution and its impact on wildlife. Staff collected more than 5,000 petitions calling on Governor Hogan and the Maryland General Assembly to take action on plastic pollution and ban single use plastic bags.

Maryland PIRG is a state based, non-partisan, citizen funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state. For forty five years we've stood up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society. That includes a long history of protecting consumers and public health.

We want to thank the Montgomery County Council for your leadership on reducing single use plastics and your efforts to keep all Marylanders safe through this crisis.

While we certainly know this proposal was well intentioned, we believe it is misguided and may have some harmful, unintended consequences.

Nothing we use for a few minutes should be allowed to pollute our communities and waterways for hundreds of years. We are experiencing a difficult and unprecedented time, but it is important that our decisions stay grounded in data. We should do everything we can to stay safe and healthy without opening the doors for environmental degradation. We are concerned that the plastic industry is exploiting the coronavirus pandemic for their own financial benefit.

An Evidenced Based Approach

Now, more than ever, we must use an evidenced based approach to public policy and trust our scientists and doctors to guide us.

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With this in mind, there is no evidence that reusable bags contribute to the spread of COVID-19, nor that plastic or paper bags are inherently safer. Thus, we should not waive the fee for single-use plastic and paper bags. In fact, waiving the fee may confuse the public about their own health and safety and create a false sense of safety with single use bags. We suggest the fee remains in place and customers be allowed to bring their own bags. We support additional measures to limit physical transmission by requiring that customers bag their own groceries.

What does work? Many Marylanders that we've spoken to are taking extra precautions to bag their own groceries to decrease the number of hands touching their bags and washing their reusable bags when possible. This way, they know exactly where their bag has been and they know that they're the only person handling it, protecting their families and protecting grocery workers.

The Plastic Industry is Misleading Policymakers and the Public

We are concerned that the plastics industry is using the global pandemic to further their agenda without relevant data to support their claims.¹ [As CBS News reports:](#)

"In March, the Plastic Industry Association wrote to U.S. Health Secretary Alex Azar urging him to 'make a public statement on the health and safety benefits seen in single-use plastics,' according to a letter obtained by Politico.

"The problem: There's no science to conclude that plastic is less likely to transmit the coronavirus than other surfaces. A recent study found that the virus that causes COVID-19 can survive on plastic for up to three days. The study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, also found that the pathogen can survive on paper for 24 hours (Researchers did not test fabric or mesh.)"

The plastics industry is promoting old, problematic studies on reusable bags as an attempt to take advantage of the novel coronavirus for their own benefit. Some of this 'data' has been submitted to you in letters of support of putting Montgomery County's bag fee on hold. For example:

- Public health experts have called the suspending of bag bans and prohibiting the use of reusable bags a '[data-free approach](#)' due to the lack of credible proof.
- [A study on bacteria found on reusable bags](#) - this study does not apply to viruses. We know that COVID-19 is a virus, and viruses and bacteria are incredibly different organisms. Their transmissions should not be conflated.
- The only current and Covid-19 specific data that we have shows that the virus lives on plastic for up to 72 hours.

¹ CBS News, "Plastic bag bans are being reversed amid coronavirus panic," <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/plastic-bag-bans-are-being-reversed-amid-coronavirus-panic/>

- The 2011 study attributed to the University of Arizona was in fact, like others, funded by the American Chemistry Council, which is the lobbying arm for the plastics industry. This study is certainly not objective, and is also very out-of-date.

[A University of Texas Medical microbiology professor has stated that washing bags will destroy the virus in 60 seconds.](#) Bringing a freshly washed bag from home and bagging your own groceries may be safer for you and workers than using a plastic bag that has been handled by multiple people. The professor goes on to say that credit card screens are far more likely to transmit the virus than bags.²

Montgomery County has been a Leader on Plastic Pollution Reduction

Most residents of Montgomery County agree that single use plastic is a problematic source of waste and litter. It threatens our public health and our wildlife. With the bag fee, Montgomery County has been a state and national leader on reducing single use plastics, and we should not take reversing this policy lightly.

As you know, single-use plastic causes serious damage every single day. Last year, Anacostia Riverkeeper tested the Anacostia in four locations - they found microplastic in all locations. At Yards Park, their results showed the water contained up to 700 microplastic particles in one liter of water. Plastic bags drift into our waterways and degrade into microplastics that are then easily digested by marine life. [Marine species that ingest these microplastics, or that become entangled in plastic bags, can suffer extreme injury or death.](#)³

[Research around the impact of microplastics on human health is a growing field, and preliminary reports show that our dependence on plastic is not only poisoning wildlife, it's poisoning us.](#)⁴ More specifically, research shows that microplastics are found in the highest concentrations in children.

CONCLUSION

In this time of public health crisis, we must do everything we can to protect public health without unnecessarily rolling back environmental protections. It is disappointing that an industry is using a pandemic that threatens our society to advance their own agenda. Thank you for everything you are doing to protect Montgomery County residents and we urge you to reject claims that are not supported by data.

² CBS News, "Plastic bag bans are being reversed amid coronavirus panic," <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/plastic-bag-bans-are-being-reversed-amid-coronavirus-panic/>

³ International Union for Conservation of Nature. Issues Brief: Marine Plastics. <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-briefs/marine-plastics>

⁴ Thompson, Richard C. Moore, Charles J. vom Saal, Frederick S., and Swaan, Shanna H. "Plastics, the environment and human health: current consensus and future trends." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2873021/>