

Public Hearing on Bill 24-24, Taxation—
Paper Carryout Bags and Prohibition on Plastic Carryout Bags (“Bring Your Own Bag”)

Testimony of David Krinsky
Rockville, Maryland
For Hearing of January 14, 2025

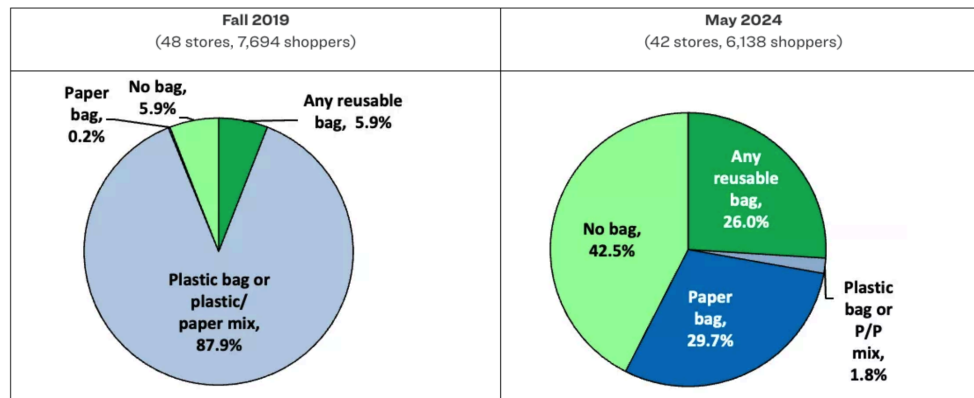
Position: **OPPOSE**

My name is David Krinsky, and I have been a resident of Montgomery County for 22 years. I am unable to attend the January 14, 2025 hearing on Bill 24-24, the “Bring Your Own Bag” bill, but as an environmentalist I write to urge the Council to reject it. In the alternative, the Council should consider continuing to permit single-use plastic bags while increasing the fee to disincentivize their use without pushing customers to more-environmentally-damaging paper bags.

Bill 24-24 is not supported by any public analysis of the overall environmental benefits, only a desire to reduce the amount of nonbiodegradable plastic litter and the release of microplastics into the environment. Staff Report at 1.¹ Troublingly, the Staff Report’s own data suggest that Bill 24-24 would cause many plastic bags to be replaced with single-use paper bags, which in several respects are worse for the environment than standard HDPE plastic bags: paper bag production emits more CO₂, uses more water, creates more waste, and leads to greater deforestation.^{2,3} The Report contains no analysis of the harms this move would cause, nor of whether they are a worthwhile tradeoff for any environmental benefits, nor of the overall costs and benefits to the county (considering economics and convenience as well as the environment).

The Staff Report’s own data provide a way to estimate the harms of Bill 24-24. The Report highlights data on the shift in bag use in Prince George’s County:

Figure 1: Distribution of Prince George’s grocery shoppers at seven major chains according to their carryout bag use, before and after the Better Bag Bill (%)



Source: Prince George’s Sierra Club Shopper Surveys, 2019 and 2024. Results are for all stores in the following grocery chains: Food Lion, Giant, Harris Teeter, Safeway, Shoppers, Wegmans, Weis Markets.

¹ Memorandum from L. McCartney-Green to County Council, Oct. 10, 2024, available at https://montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/Viewer.php?view_id=169&event_id=16285&meta_id=184743.

² <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2020/04/30/plastic-paper-cotton-bags/>

³ <https://www.trees.com/banning-paper-bags-would-help-the-planet-but-more-than-half-of-americans-are-against-it>

Staff Report FAQ at 3 (PDF page 18). If Montgomery County sees a similar shift from 87.9% plastic plus 0.2% paper to 29.7% paper plus 1.8% plastic, we can estimate that for every 861 single-use plastic bags the Bill eliminates, 295 paper bags (plus a number of reusable bags) will take their place.⁴

That is not a good trade, even ignoring entirely the reusable bags (the environmental impact of which is amortized across multiple uses, but is not actually zero). Every paper bag produced emits much more carbon than a plastic bag—2.5 g versus 0.7 g.⁵ Thus, for every 1,000 total bags, Bill 24-24 replaces 603 grams of carbon emissions from plastic with 738 grams from paper—*more than a 20% increase in carbon emissions*, again ignoring entirely the even-more-energy-intensive recyclable bags (which do not last forever). Paper bags also use more than three times as much water to produce, generate twice as much waste by mass, and of course require killing trees to make.⁶

One could presumably do other analyses of additional costs—such as of the environmental costs of reusable plastic and cotton bags, factoring in their longevity—and the benefits—some unquantified reduction in litter and microplastics. But no such analysis has been done, at least not that the Council has disclosed. Nor has there been any consideration of the equities of trading a local environmental harm and cost savings (litter and its cleanup costs) for a global one.

Speaking anecdotally for myself, I rarely see single-use plastic bag litter; I question whether this is a problem in need of a solution, particularly given that there has been no suggestion of harms from plastic bags that are properly disposed of in the County waste stream and incinerated for power. And, of course, single-use plastic bags are popular and convenient—the cost of eliminating them is not zero even aside from the bag tax.

But even the environmental harms should suffice. **I respectfully urge the Council to reject Bill 24-24.** More analysis is warranted before any action is taken, as OIG Report #23-15 suggests.⁷ If the Council were to do anything, it should consider alternative actions, such as increasing the bag fee (perhaps to 10¢) *without* banning plastic bags, that will not lead retailers and customers to replace plastic with paper.

Thank you for your time and attention to these issues.

⁴ 87.9% (plastic before) – 1.8% (plastic after) = 86.1% (difference); 29.7% (paper after) – 0.2% (paper before) = 29.5% (difference).

⁵ <https://www.greenmatch.co.uk/blog/plastic-paper-or-reusable-bag>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OIG/Resources/Files/PDF/IGActivity/FY2023/OIG23-15.pdf>, at i (“The county should do more to assess the impact of the carryout bag tax.”).