



2025 Jan 14

RE: Montgomery County Council Bill 24-24, “Bring Your Own Bag”

In Support:

My name is Kit Gage, and I’ve lived in Montgomery County since 1984. I’m Advocacy Director of Friends of Sligo Creek, board member and former president, and am speaking on behalf of Friends of Sligo Creek.

Friends of Sligo Creek is an over 20 year old nonprofit community organization dedicated to protecting, improving, and appreciating the ecological health of Sligo Creek Park and its surrounding watershed.

We support the Plastic bag bill introduced by Chair Kate Stewart and cosponsored by others. We’ll list some particular areas we support and a few additional recommendations.

The creation, distribution, use, reuse, recycling and landfilling issues when you compare plastics with cloth, nylon or other reusable bags are complicated. I’ll leave some of that to my colleague Vivian Thomson, retired professor in the departments of Environmental Science and Politics at UVA. Instead, I’ll focus on what we see and don’t see in Sligo Creek and the watershed. Since the tax on plastic bags, we may be seeing somewhat fewer plastic bags in the creek and watershed – I say as a plogger/collector of trash in the park. But they are still clearly around. We especially see them after rain events – stuck in branches overhanging the creek, and wrapped around other trash, not to mention those holding pet waste.

As you know, the negative implications of plastics for the stream environment now are being better understood. This is true for whole bags as well as microparticles of plastic that are what bags degrade into, which all creatures including humans are ingesting. And the implications are of great concern for all these creatures. The problem is massive. Even relatively locally, anyone who sees the Anacostia River, where our creek flows, sees masses of bags, bottles, cans and other detritus flowing down.

Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection waste composition surveys indicate that in 2023 we disposed of between 241 and 294 million plastic shopping bags into the waste stream (not including recycling efforts or littering). Imagine that for a minute.

FOSC Recommendations:

- The focus should be on reuse and reduction in use of single use bags, so the bag fees should be increased gradually over a few years as further incentive. Also, fees should be charged not only on paper, but also on exempted use plastic bags. Some exempted uses in the bill should be reconsidered, as pharmacies and seasonal events can typically use paper bags (as Safeway pharmacy and others do already).
- We agree that residents on food assistance programs should not have to pay the bag fee and should be given reusable bags as previously.
- The county needs to better enforce any bag tax than it does currently, including assuming this bill passes, for both paper and plastic bags. The county's use count indicates a massive under collection.
- If bag use overall declines significantly (with the better tax collection system), increase the Water Quality Protection Charge to make up loss of revenue. So instead of being a 'sin' tax, this will be an equitably distributed fee.

Further background on FOSC: Led by FOSC members, our volunteers lead the county in efforts to organize Sweep the Creek and other litter clean-up events and invasive plant removal clear-out events in the park. We offer indoor programs for learning and organize guided outdoor explorations. We test the creek and related waterways regularly to provide data to the County and environmental groups, including salt measurement – now quite horrifying. We support neighborhood projects to reduce stormwater runoff and the environmental damage it can cause. And we monitor civic developments and advocate for policies and initiatives that will support a healthier Sligo Creek. We work in coalition on stormwater and forest conservation issues, as well as with other watershed and stream groups.
