



Maryland Chapter

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House of Delegates Environmental Matters Committee

HB 718 – Community Cleanup and Greening Act of 2014

Position: Support

Date: February 21st, 2014

Good afternoon Madame Chair and members of the committee. My name is Martha Ainsworth, I'm Chair of the Prince George's Sierra Club, representing the Sierra Club Maryland Chapter today. With me is Anne Ambler, President of the Neighbors of the Northwest Branch.

We encourage you to support this bill, which would enable the counties of Maryland to reduce the use of disposable shopping bags, a major source of litter and a danger to our waterways and wildlife. The purpose of a bag fee is not to raise revenue, but to change behavior – an incentive for shoppers to use fewer disposable shopping bags. The less revenue raised, the more successful is the policy.

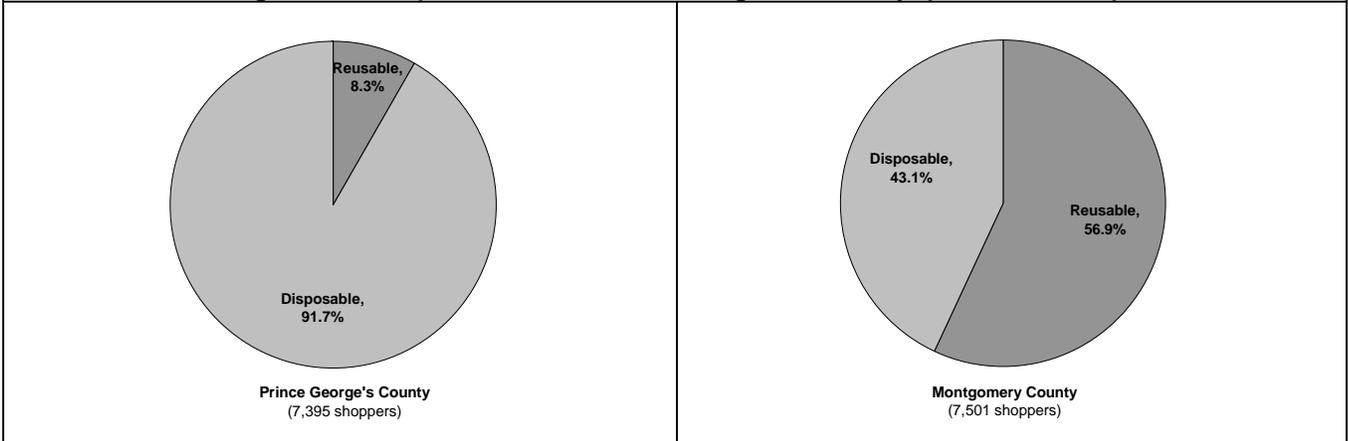
Today we will share with you dramatic new evidence from a systematic survey of bag use of nearly 17,000 shoppers in 56 grocery stores in Montgomery County and 46 in Prince George's, pointing to the potential impact of a bag fee on shopper behavior in other counties. Montgomery County's 5-cent bag fee was implemented two years ago, while the Prince George's County Council and Executive have endorsed the policy but await enabling legislation to adopt it.

The survey was conducted on weekends in January-February, 2014. It covered all stores from five grocery chains in both counties: Giant, Safeway, Shoppers Food Warehouse, Food Lion, and Wegman's. The enumerators recorded the number of shoppers who exited with all reusable bags, all disposable bags, a mix of the two, or all unbagged merchandise, over an hour.

Main findings

- **Montgomery shoppers, who must pay for disposable bags at the checkout, are substantially more likely to use reusable bags than are Prince George's shoppers, who pay for the "free" bags through higher grocery bills (figure 1):** 57% of Montgomery shoppers with bagged merchandise had reusable bags, compared with only 8% of Prince George's shoppers.

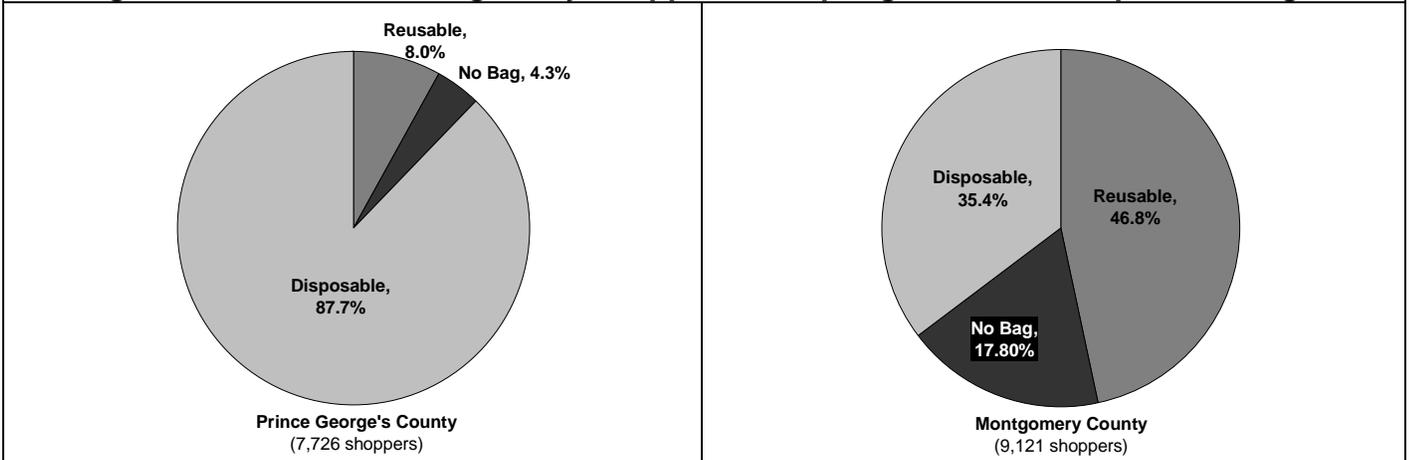
Fig. 1: Reusable bags are seven times more popular in Montgomery County (with a bag incentive) than in Prince George's County (without one)*



* Among all shoppers who used bags. "Reusable" includes those with exclusively reusable bags and a mix.

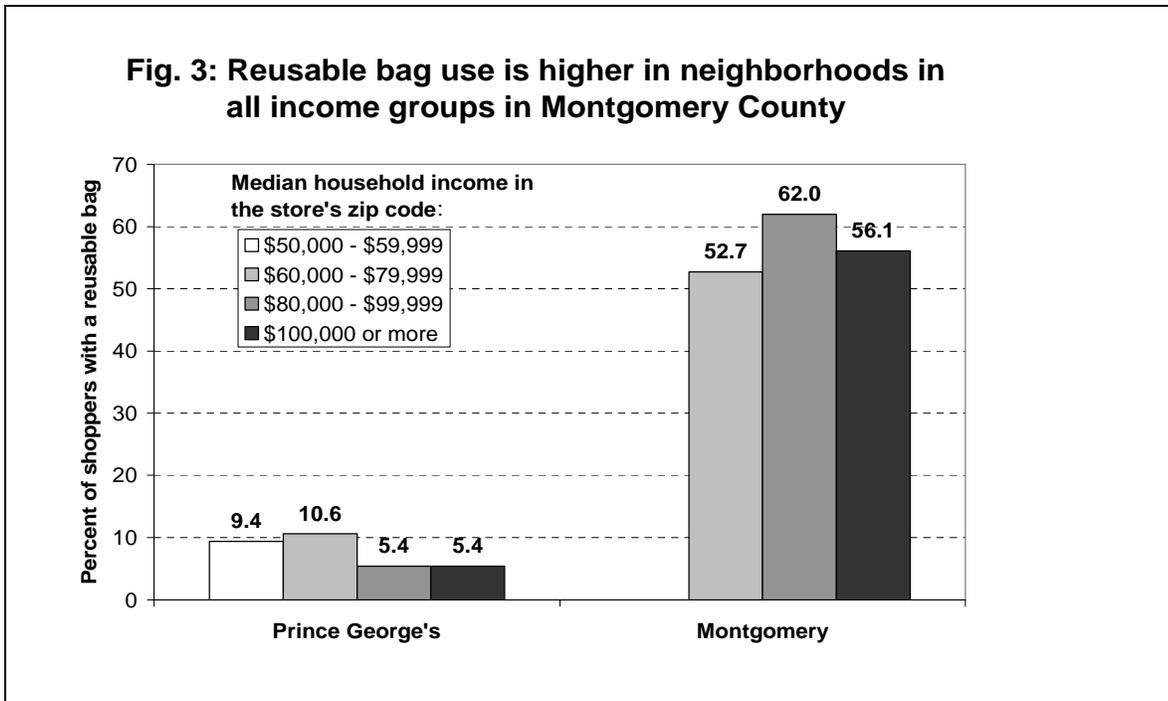
- **Montgomery shoppers are also four times more likely to exit with unbagged merchandise, an additional impact of the incentive.** About 18% of Montgomery shoppers exited carrying unbagged merchandise, compared with only 4% of Prince George's shoppers. Prince George's shoppers tended to carry items that were too large to bag (toilet paper, paper towels, soft drinks), while Montgomery shoppers were also carrying unbagged milk bottles, egg cartons, and smaller items that otherwise might have been bagged.
- **Taking into account both reusable bags and unbagged merchandise, nearly two-thirds of Montgomery grocery shoppers (64.5%) are not using disposable bags (Figure 2).** In Prince George's, without a bag fee, the figure is only 12%.

Fig. 2: Two-thirds of Montgomery shoppers are opting not to use disposable bags*



*Among all shoppers exiting with bags or unbagged merchandise.

- **Montgomery shoppers who continued to use disposable bags seemed to be using fewer bags than were Prince George’s shoppers.** They tended to have more unbagged items in their carts – like juice, milk bottles, and items with handles.
- **Montgomery shoppers have higher reusable bag use than Prince George’s shoppers in neighborhoods at every income level** (figure 3). It could be argued that other factors – like higher incomes in Montgomery County – are affecting the results. The shopper data have been linked to the median household income of each store’s zip code, using 5-year estimates (2008-2012) from the US Bureau of the Census’ American Community Survey. The results also suggest that in both counties shoppers in the wealthiest areas are slightly *less* likely to use reusable bags than those in areas with the next lowest income.



- **There has been very little change in reusable bag use in Prince George’s County in the absence of a bag fee.** An identical survey was conducted in Prince George’s in 2012. Despite public education and free bag giveaways, reusable bag use rose from only 7% of shoppers in 2012 to 8% in 2014.

Conclusion

- **After two years of implementation, Montgomery County’s bag fee seems to have had a substantial impact on shopper behavior.** There is no baseline measurement from before the fee went into effect, but a comparison of shopper behavior in the same grocery chains in Prince George’s County, with no fee, controlling for neighborhood income, suggests the likely effect on shopper behavior if a bag fee were adopted by other counties.
- **Behavior change from the fee has reduced plastic bag litter.** The Friends of Sligo Creek, who count and categorize trash collected in the creek, found plastic bags dropped from 2168 items at the spring 2011 cleanup (before the fee) to just 223 items at the spring 2013 cleanup. Plastic bags are now practically absent from the litter pulled from the Northwest Branch in Montgomery County.

- **The bag fee incentive in Montgomery County has provided greater consumer choice.**
Two-thirds of grocery shoppers are choosing not to use a disposable bag – and therefore are not paying for them. Only shoppers who actually use disposable bags must pay. In Prince George’s and other counties without a bag incentive, the cost of providing the “free” disposable bags at checkout is passed on to all shoppers in their grocery bills, whether or not they choose to bring a reusable bag or to use no bag at all. There is no incentive to minimize use of disposable bags because the costs are hidden. The environmental costs of disposing of those bags are passed on to the entire county. This bill will place the costs of the bags on the user, and incentivize good environmental practices
- **The preferred approach for low-income communities is to provide free reusable bags.**
Reusable bag use is high in neighborhoods at all income levels served by these grocery chains in Montgomery County, relative to a county with no fee. Exempting lower-income neighborhoods would substantially undermine the objective of the fee – to reduce plastic trash and its environmental impacts. Both the District of Columbia and Montgomery County offer free bags to low-income or special need groups, rather than exempting them.

In conclusion, we urge you to support this bill, which will enable counties to reduce plastic trash at its source for the benefit of the environment, our waterways, and wildlife, and to provide greater choice to consumers. Thank you for your time and we welcome your questions.

Sincerely,

Martha Ainsworth
Chair, Prince George’s Sierra Club Group
Legislative Committee,
Sierra Club Maryland Chapter

Anne Ambler
President
Neighbors of the Northwest Branch

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. We encourage our members, individually and collectively, to “Explore, enjoy and protect the planet.” We have chapters in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, with more than 600,000 members nationwide, including more than 15,000 members in the Maryland Chapter.