

Conservation Montgomery

Working together to enhance our quality of life

Finding our Voice

Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors

Published on www.ConservationMontgomery.org



What will Maryland look like with 50 million fewer plastic bags?

By Jennifer Chambers, Conservation Montgomery Board of Directors

January 2011

Consider this scenario. You walk into the corner convenience store and buy a soda. And as you pay the cashier, he automatically puts the soda into a plastic bag, which then lives on as trash in one of these potential venues:

- The bag sits on your car floor and eventually makes its way to a garbage can only to live forever in a landfill;
- It accidentally becomes a parachute, drifting in the wind until it gets snagged by a tree branch where it lives permanently as the wind slowly rips it to shreds; or
- It gets blown into the street where it continues its [windswept journey](#) into a storm drain and the closest stream, only to get stuck under a rock where it lives its life in the water's riffles or it continues its travels to the Chesapeake Bay where a turtle mistakes the plastic bag for a jelly fish, eats it and then dies from intestinal distress.

Are Marylanders part of a 100-billion plastic bag dependency worldwide where 4 billion bags become litter in our trees, waterways, parks, roadways and the remaining 96 billion bags are left discarded to live in landfills forever? To produce 100 billion plastic bags, 12 million barrels of oil must be extracted from the Earth (Washingtonpost.com). Then the bags are consumed just so that humans can carry their purchases.

Okay, let's put this into perspective. Maryland's population is approximately 5.7 million people, or .001% of the world's population. Marylanders use approximately 100 million plastic bags -- of which 4 million are litter in our communities and natural areas.

What can Marylanders do to shake its dependency on plastic bags? It's simple: switch to reusable shopping bags and support the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Consumer Retail Choice Act, otherwise known as the Maryland Bag Bill. Twice before, State Delegate Al Carr (D-18th District) and Senator Jamie Raskin (D-20th District) have introduced this legislation. The bill will be introduced again in this year's Maryland legislature. The bill imposes a 5 cent fee for each plastic or paper bag used by a consumer, with some exceptions: farm stands and markets. Opponents call it a tax; however, it is not a tax. Unlike a sales tax, consumers are not forced to pay the fee. They have a choice: use reusable shopping bags or pay for paper or plastic bags. Opponents also allege that the fee would create a hardship for low-income families. However, the legislation requires the Maryland Department of the Environment to work with community organizations to provide free reusable bags. The revenue generated from the bag fee will be used by non-profits around the state to clean up

and restore the Chesapeake Bay and streams and rivers in its watershed. Del. Carr recently stated in the Gazette, “The bill is not intended to be a revenue generator but to encourage behavior change.”

Similar legislation has been enacted in California and [District](#) of Columbia. Since D.C. enacted a bag fee in January 2010, it has seen a 50 percent decrease in the number of bags used by shoppers. D.C. consumers are using five million fewer bags. Furthermore, the [Anacostia Watershed Society](#) (AWS) has seen a 60 percent decrease in the number of plastic bags found during the [AWS river clean-ups](#) ([Gazette, 1/5/11](#)).

[Virginia](#) state lawmakers are expected to introduce their own bag bill this year. Imagine for a moment what our Mid-Atlantic waterways, parks, and communities will look like when legislation in both states is enacted and our shopping behaviors change. Furthermore, animal habitats, such as streams and forests, will become cleaner and healthier. Humans want healthy homes. Animals depend on it for survival.

To encourage a larger population to change often calls for new measures to be implemented in order to reach a goal for the common good. Reducing our consumption of plastic shopping bags for convenience goes beyond human good. It is good for all living creatures. Public education can be effective in changing behavior. But sometimes, reaching a wide audience cannot be achieved without legislation.

In seeking the greater good through sustainable environmental practices, we advocate not only for generations to come but for the endangered wildlife whose habitat depends on protections offered by humans. The bag bill promises a better way for us to reduce our use of petroleum products, to share the planet with wildlife, and to preserve our environment for future generations.

###

The views of a particular Board Member of Conservation Montgomery may not reflect the views of each Board member or their respective organizations on every topic covered in the *Finding our Voice* op/eds.