

**MEMORANDUM**

District of Columbia  
Bladensburg\*  
Bowie  
College Park  
Frederick  
Frederick County  
Gaithersburg  
Greenbelt  
Montgomery County  
Prince George's County  
Rockville  
Takoma Park  
Alexandria  
Arlington County  
Fairfax  
Fairfax County  
Falls Church  
Loudoun County  
Manassas  
Manassas Park  
Prince William County

To: COG Board of Directors  
C. D.

From: Cathy Drzyzgula, Chair  
Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee

Date: March 27, 2009

Subject: Recommendations Supporting Measures to Greatly Reduce the Occurrence of Plastic Bags in the Region's Rivers and Streams

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**Recommendation Summary**

As Chair of the Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee (CBPC), I recommend that the COG Board adopt Resolution R20-09. The resolution (1) indicates COG's support for measures to greatly reduce the occurrence of plastic bags in the region's rivers and streams; (2) encourages members to assess the feasibility of reducing plastic bag pollution through various programs; and (3) directs the CBPC to compile regional data on plastic bag pollution, survey the effectiveness of controls implemented in other areas, and report back to the Board in three months.

This memo outlines the committee's rationale for this action and reports on its preliminary findings to date.

**Background**

Elected officials representing most of COG's members have joined with more than 100 others to sign the Potomac River Watershed Trash Treaty pledging to achieve a "trash-free" Potomac by 2013. Among other things, the signatories commit to "supporting and implementing regional strategies aimed at reducing trash and increasing recycling."

To confront this issue directly, legislation has been or is being considered in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. To assist its members in better understanding the technical issues related to this legislation, COG's Recycling Committee sponsored a forum on March 19 on controlling plastic and paper bag pollution. Various speakers highlighted the scope of the problem, discussed proposed solutions and provided a perspective from the retail industry, plastic and paper bag manufacturers and community-based organizations.

\*Adjunct member

## **Preliminary Findings from the Forum**

Detrimental effects of trash in the landscape include both aesthetic and environmental health issues. Stormwater washes trash off the streets and sidewalks so that it tends to concentrate along streams and rivers. In addition to its aesthetic impact, trash that persists or that degrades very slowly, such as plastic, can be taken up by aquatic organisms and cause ecological problems. These impacts extend beyond the region to the Chesapeake Bay and even the Atlantic Ocean. Use of these bags has other environmental impacts as well, including potential greenhouse gas emissions and use of nonrenewable resources in the manufacturing process.

Given the difficulty in measuring trash, we do not have a precise estimate for the amount or volume of trash in the region that winds up in our waterways. The District of Columbia Department of the Environment recently estimated that as much as 16,000 tons of trash enter the Anacostia River each year.

Similarly, there are not precise estimates for the composition of this trash or the contribution of individual items to the overall weight or volume of trash found in waterways. Measured by number of items, plastic bags are one of the top types of trash, accounting for a majority of the items recorded by field surveys in the Anacostia basin dating back to 1998. But it is unlikely that such bags constitute a majority of trash by other measurements, such as weight.

The Anacostia watershed has been listed as “impaired” because of trash under the provisions of the Clean Water Act. Accordingly, a TMDL (total maximum daily load) for trash is under development and various trash mitigation efforts are being incorporated in municipal stormwater permits in the region. The cost of such mitigation efforts is still largely unknown.

Legislation aimed at controlling “bag pollution” was introduced in the Maryland and Virginia general assemblies in 2009, as well as in the District of Columbia City Council. The bills in the District, Maryland and Virginia propose a range of control measures, including the imposition of fees for bag use, mandating recyclable content in bags, and simply banning certain types of bags. (Some of the Maryland legislation is still pending; none of the Virginia bills on this subject was approved.)

In the District of Columbia, Council Member Tommy Wells, who addressed the CBPC on this topic on March 20, has introduced a bill that would ban the use of non-recyclable carryout plastic bags without any recycled content and impose a five-cent per-bag fee on consumers who accept either paper or plastic carryout bags from various types of retail establishments. Disposable carryout bags, whether paper or plastic, would have to contain at least 40 percent post-consumer content and be completely recyclable.

The local legislative efforts follow in the footsteps of a few other jurisdictions around the country. The cities of San Francisco and Westport, Ct., have established bans on disposable bags. Other jurisdictions are considering bans and fees. Similar actions have been taken in a few foreign areas as well, including the country of Ireland.

Industry representatives at the Recycling Committee forum expressed several concerns about these proposals. They said that consumers tend to like plastic bags and find them convenient and reusable. They encouraged efforts to increase recycling rather than imposing bans or fees, which could be a burden for lower income people. They suggested that the problem is the few people who litter and

passing a ban or imposing a fee would not address this issue. The industry representatives also suggested that the similar measures that have been approved elsewhere have not been successful in reducing the amount of bag trash.

### **Committee Action**

On March 20, the CBPC reviewed the findings from the forum and heard from Council Member Wells. The committee concluded that trash from bags is exactly the type of problem addressed by the Trash Treaty. It is a serious water quality issue that should be addressed by local governments in the region. However, committee members also concluded that more information is needed before COG takes action to potentially endorse a ban- or fee-based program. In particular, the CBPC wants to better understand the effectiveness of measures that have been considered elsewhere and also the extent of the problem of bags in streams in the COG region. Accordingly, the CBPC recommends that the COG Board adopt Resolution R20-09, which:

- Affirms that the Council supports local and regional efforts to eliminate the widespread and chronic problem of plastic bags that pollute the region's streams and rivers;
- Encourages each of the signatories of the Potomac River Trash Treaty to assess the feasibility of implementing measures to address this problem;
- Directs the CBPC to survey the effectiveness of measures that have been considered and implemented elsewhere aimed at reducing the incidence of plastic bags in waterways; and
- Directs the CBPC to compile data demonstrating the extent of the occurrence of plastic bags in waterways in the COG region.

The findings of these analyses should be presented to the Council within three months of the date of this resolution.

Attachments: Resolution R20-09

Resolution R20-09  
DRAFT April 8, 2009

**METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS  
777 N. Capitol St., N.E.  
Washington, DC 20002**

**RESOLUTION SUPPORTING CONSIDERATION OF MEASURES TO GREATLY REDUCE THE  
OCCURRENCE OF PLASTIC BAGS IN THE REGION'S RIVERS AND STREAMS**

**WHEREAS**, the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and their many tributaries are a vital recreational resource for the region and a key contributor to the region's quality of life; and

**WHEREAS**, this resource is severely degraded by the many forms of trash that float on the surface and collect on the shorelines of these rivers and streams; and

**WHEREAS**, available data indicate that plastic carryout bags are the largest single source of trash in the Anacostia River tributaries, and one of the largest sources in the Potomac and Anacostia rivers; and

**WHEREAS**, plastic carryout bags create significant litter problems in the Metropolitan Washington region's streets, sewer systems, streams, and the environment;

**WHEREAS**, other jurisdictions worldwide have seen a dramatic decrease in disposable bag use when small fees have been implemented that encourage consumers to choose reusable shopping bags; and

**WHEREAS**, more than 100 political leaders in the Potomac Watershed have signed the Potomac Watershed Trash Treaty committed to a "Trash-Free Potomac by 2013"; and

**WHEREAS**, through Resolutions R77-07, R15-06 and R40-05, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (Council) has affirmed its support for meeting the goal of a Trash Free Potomac by 2013;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE METROPOLITAN  
WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS THAT:**

1. The Council supports local and regional efforts to eliminate the widespread and chronic problem of plastic bags that pollute the region's streams and rivers.
2. The Council encourages each of the signatories of the Potomac River Trash Treaty to assess the feasibility of implementing measures, both regulatory and incentive-based initiatives, to address this problem.
3. The Council directs the Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee to work with appropriate COG technical committees to: survey the effectiveness of measures that have been considered and implemented elsewhere aimed at reducing the incidence of plastic bags in waterways; and compile data demonstrating the extent of the occurrence of plastic bags in waterways in the COG region. The findings of these analyses should be presented to the Council within three months of the date of this resolution.