

## Why a Plastic Bag Fee Makes Good Sense for Virginia Beach

**Background:** In 2020, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation which the Governor signed authorizing Virginia localities to impose a fee of five cents per disposable plastic bag provided to retail customers by grocery stores, drug stores, and convenience stores. The [Virginia Department of Taxation](#) provides guidance for City Council about how to implement a local ordinance. Taxes are submitted to the VA Department of Taxation and the funds are available to localities to support:

- Environmental cleanup programs
- Pollution and litter mitigation programs
- Educational programs on environmental waste
- Provision of reusable plastic bags to recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) benefits

Currently, Albemarle County, Alexandria City, Arlington County, Charlottesville City, Fairfax City, Fairfax County, Falls Church City, Fredericksburg City, Loudoun County, Richmond City, and Roanoke City have passed local ordinances.

**Economy:** Single use plastic bags at checkout are not really free. Stores include the cost of plastic bags as operating costs when pricing their items. In addition, the cost of cleaning up plastic bags and other waste are paid by the community. You are paying for the use of the bag twice. Unfortunately, recycling is not a viable solution to this dilemma and often clogs the machinery utilized by municipalities for disposal and recycling. Additionally, many plastic film recycling programs are prohibitively costly for business and municipalities and are not accessible to the average consumer. Part of the user fee is returned to stores to assist in covering costs of producing reusable bags and many stores have already eliminated single-use plastic bags with little difficulty (e.g. Whole Foods Market, Wegmans, Lidl, Aldi, Trader Joe's). For the times you forget and need a plastic bag, the average cost of the fee per household is less than [\\$5 per year](#). A clean community can also generate income, according to a [NOAA study](#), decreases in marine debris in coastal Maryland & Delaware could generate an additional \$30 to 50 million in recreation and tourism spending. To save money for yourself and the community, reusable bags are the best option.

**Environment:** Bag user fees reduce the plastic waste stream and protect the environment. Billions of plastic bags become litter and according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), only 2% percent of plastic bags are recycled resulting in single-use bags making up more than 10% of marine debris on US coastlines. Unsurprisingly, single-use bags are among the [most littered](#) items in Virginia Beach and across the state as evident to anyone who has participated in a local cleanup. They end up on our roadways, waterways, and coastlines, threatening wildlife and ecosystem health and creating eyesores. Plastic bag policies have shown an estimated [30 to 37% reduction in the presence of entangled animals](#) where they are enacted. Overall, reusable bags are better for the environment. Energy and carbon footprints of reusable products diminish over time as you use them, while single-use products never recuperate their environmental costs. This makes single-use plastic bags the worst possible option for the environment.

**Social:** Bag user fees are equitable and can protect communities from plastic pollution while removing barriers to environmentally friendly behaviors. Plastic bag user fees are equitable because municipalities can reinvest the generated revenue to provide free reusable bags for citizens through WIC and SNAP. In addition, LRNow has a bag distribution program which provides bags to various food pantries within Virginia Beach. These bags can be reused by participants at the pantry and out in the community. Further, [low-income communities are more impacted](#) by litter therefore they have more to gain by reducing single-use plastic and increased cleanup activities. Plastics in the environment also breakdown and pose health risks. People routinely ingest and inhale microplastics, and microplastics have been found in all human organs tested, including the [heart, brain, lungs, and reproductive organs](#). [Studies](#) show that microplastics are associated with cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disease, dementia, obesity, type 2 diabetes, preterm birth, neurodevelopmental conditions, and decreased fertility. This requires small behavior

changes such as remembering to bring your bags to the store that will have a large impact on quality of life for all members of the community.

**Conclusion:** Plastic bag user fees provide a proven way of reducing pollution, “[plastic bag policies lead to a 25 to 47% decrease in plastic bags as a share of total items collected \[at cleanups\] relative to areas without policies.](#)” Plastic bag fees provide a proactive and proven way of keeping pollution out of our communities and our waterways, as opposed to relying solely on reactive and costly programs such as cleanups. Relying on recycling technologies and clean-ups, according to [leading scientists](#), cannot alone solve the plastic pollution problem we are facing today. Plastic bag user fees are an equitable, economically beneficial, and environmentally friendly solution to fight one front of the plastic pollution crisis.

The Virginia Beach City Council should take the lead in Hampton and enact a Plastic Bag Fee Ordinance. Additionally, the revenue generated should go to the Departments of Parks & Recreation and Public Works/Waste Management, which are best suited to apply the funds to litter prevention cleanups, community education, and outreach.