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Joint Committee on Administrative,
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Joint Committee on Ending
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Testimony in Support of HB 314: Plastic Bag Reduction Act
Environment and Transportation Committee
January 28, 2021

What this bill does

The Plastic Bag Reduction Act provides us an opportunity to enact legislation that benefits a variety of stakeholders: it provides transparency and options for consumers; lowers costs for local governments; cleans up our neighborhoods and waterways; and, many studies show that banning bags cause changes in consumer behavior leading to greater adoption of reusable bags, saving businesses money. This legislation bans stores from distributing carryout plastic bags to customers at the point of sale.

Why this bill matters

Single-use plastic bags are everywhere: they litter our neighborhoods, streets, communities, and waterways. Marylanders generate approximately 11,967,810 tons of solid waste a year, and about 13% comes from plastics, including bags. In my own district, it is impossible to escape the sight of plastic bags - whether they are blowing down the street toward the water, stuck in trees, or floating in the Harbor. **Plastic bags cannot be recycled by any municipal or county government in Maryland.** Plastic bags are not accepted in curbside recycling because they jam machinery and can cause expensive damage. While some stores allow you to bring your plastic bags for recycling, Waste Management, Inc reports that only about 1% of bags are actually returned to stores nationally. Plastic bags do not biodegrade, and instead, break up into micro plastics which harm wildlife that accidentally ingests them.

Marylanders bear the cost of cleaning up this litter - our tax dollars are spent in trash remediation and litter pick-up every day. Businesses also bear the cost of giving away these bags for free at checkout.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, this legislation has become even more critical. Studies are showing that with the influx of carry-out and delivery, the use of single-use plastics has exponentially increased. By some estimates, there was a 30% increase in plastic waste in 2020. There is no evidence to suggest reusable bags are any less safe than single-use plastic bags. The increased use of disposable plastic bags is short-sighted, ignoring the long-term environmental and health consequences.

The massive uptick in plastics hasn't just led to an increase in waste - it has led to an increase in plastic production. Plastic plants were already releasing about 80 million tons of greenhouse gases each year. Imagine the burden on our environment in the midst of this pandemic where single-use PPE, plastic packaging, and plastic bags are on the rise. And, for our most vulnerable communities, we are keenly aware of the negative impacts of air pollution. Those suffering from respiratory health issues are already at an increased risk of experiencing adverse effects and higher rates of death from COVID-19. The increase in plastic use will only continue to exacerbate air pollution through the polluting processes used to create plastic to the incineration and disposal practices that deal with the waste. Air pollution and respiratory health will be worsened by the effects of increased plastic usage.

This legislation is also sensitive to the burdens on businesses in the current economy, providing businesses more than a year to meet the requirements of this legislation which would not go into effect until July 1, 2022. This gives businesses time to work cost adjustments for switching to paper bags or selling reusable bags, if they chose to do so, into their budgets.

Why should you vote for this bill

We should not allow something that is used only for a few minutes to pollute our communities, waterways, and threaten wildlife for centuries. The plastic bag production process harms people and the environment by releasing greenhouse gases, and the bags continue to harm our ecosystems, communities, and ourselves. We must take action now to end the scourge of plastic bags and dramatically reduce litter in our neighborhoods and waterways.