

Jeffrey Malone

Feature Story Friday – March 26, 2010

### The War on Plastic Bags

In the ever-ongoing fight against pollution, plastic bags have been a continual target. Baltimore recently threw its weight behind an anti-plastic bag effort. A bill that was endorsed last week by a committee of the Baltimore City Council would give food stores the choice of offering only plastic bags or encouraging their customers to cut back on or recycle the plastic bags if they continue to use plastics. The specific terms of the bill stipulate that stores and restaurants must enroll in the city's "plastic bag reduction program." This program requires that merchants provide plastic bag recycling bins and encourage the use of reusable bags. Violators *will* face fines of \$100 to \$1,000 for multiple offenses.

Some may think that this measure does not go far enough, while others may deem it a reasonable compromise. Councilman James B. Kraft believes that the measure should overcome objections that storeowners have had to outright bans or bag fees. He characterizes it as a middle ground that will "do something no one else has been able to do – pass a measure ... that is acceptable to the business community and to the environmental community."

The environmental community may prefer this resolution to no action at all, but this does not mean that they are completely happy. Mary Roby, executive director of the Herring Run Watershed Association, an environmental advocacy group, thinks it would have been "easier to just ban the bags."

Other concerns about the bill have also been expressed. Councilman Bill Henry, an advocate for a 25-cent fee on every plastic and paper bag, questions whether this bill is enough to change consumer habits sufficiently, but he is willing to give this a chance for the next couple of years. (By the looks of this bill's progress, it appears that everyone will have to give this approach a chance.)

A recent op-ed feature in the Baltimore Sun points out that the reduction program calls for merchants to do things that many of them are already doing: accept plastic bags for recycling, sell reusable bags, and encourage customers to use those reusable bags. If most grocery stores already have these recycling efforts (and my experiences suggest that they do) and plastic bag pollution is still a problem in Baltimore, then there may just need to be more done than what this bill is calling for.

Merchants and manufacturers of plastic and paper bags have generally welcomed this bill. Joseph Kim, president of the Baltimore chapter of KAGRO, which represents about 500 Korean-American grocers and liquor storeowners, believes that his members and customers will adjust to the new bag requirements. He does add that public education and advertising is likely necessary to get consumers to change their habits.

The potential success of Baltimore's plastic bag bill may be indicated by the results that other cities have seen. Annapolis also tried out voluntary recycling, setting an unenforceable goal of reducing the number of plastic bags given away by 40 percent. A spokesman for the Annapolis city government said the goal has not been achieved, and data from the merchants is hard to come by anyway. Another

example close to Baltimore – the nation’s capital – offers a more successful model. Washington, D.C. implemented a 5-cents per bag fee on shoppers at the start of the year, and this measure has been widely credited with reducing demand for disposable bags by 50 percent. The extreme end of the scale is represented by San Francisco, which banned plastics outright in 2007. City officials have measured a 50 percent drop in plastic bag litter on the streets since the ban took effect.

The recent history from other cities suggests that if Baltimore is serious about reducing plastic bag waste, they will have to follow a course less similar to Annapolis and more along the lines of San Francisco (or at least Washington). A harder push may anger merchants and bag manufacturers. It will likely please environmental activists. Consumers would certainly have to adjust; it is always difficult to be forced to change one’s habits. As this bill moves ahead, the city council has to ask itself whose interests they should be serving when it comes to reducing waste.

Source:

[www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com)