

## Reform Isn't In the Bag

City's plan to ban plastic bags will face obstacles in Richmond.

By Michael Lee Pope

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It's an age old question: Paper or plastic? But Councilman Tim Lovain says it's also an existential predicament, threatening the future of the planet. The first-term councilman has proposed that Alexandria ban plastic bags, following the lead of countries such as Ireland, Bangladesh, South Africa, Thailand and Taiwan. He first proposed the idea in an [Alexandria Gazette Packet op ed](#) published in May, and now he has added an item to the city's legislative packet during the upcoming General Assembly session.

"They are a plague," Lovain declared during a City Council discussion last week about the upcoming General Assembly session. "The time has come to do something."

At Lovain's request, council members added a plank to their legislative agenda that asks member of the local delegation to introduce legislation that would allow Alexandria to pass an ordinance prohibiting retail merchants from using plastic carryout bags. Under Virginia's "Dillon Rule," the General Assembly would be required to grant the city permission for such a prohibition before the City Council could take action on the plan. But a similar effort in the Isle of Wight was rejected in Richmond earlier this year, and a similar attempt by Alexandria could meet the same fate.

"It'll be tough," admitted Bernie Caton, the city's legislative director. "There's a lot of resistance by certain members of the General Assembly to give localities greater authority."

Under newly created Republican rules, members of the House of Delegates are limited to introducing 15 bills each this year, so Alexandria's three delegates are carefully weighting their own priorities against the needs of the local jurisdictions they serve. Del. Adam Ebbin (D-49) said that he is considering introducing a bill that would add a fee of up to 5 cents per bag that could fund environmental causes such as the Chesapeake Bay Fund.

"The fee would give consumers the choice to pay a fee or bring their own reusable bags," said Ebbin. "We need to get people into a different mindset about the use of plastic bags."

**EFFORTS TO BAN** plastic bags or give localities the authority to do so are certain to face stiff opposition from retailers and their allies in the General Assembly. According to the Virginia Retail Merchants Association, paper bags will last just as long as plastic bags in a modern landfill because of the lack of water, light and oxygen required for the degradation process. And association officials say that adding a per-bag fee for the Chesapeake Bay Fund or any other cause would create additional layers of bureaucracy for businesses that are already struggling with the current economic environment.

"It would be yet another record-keeping issue where we would have to track, segregate and collect the money," said Tom Zapf, chairman of the Virginia Retail Merchants Association. "If you have to drive back home because you forgot your reusable bag, what will your carbon footprint be then?"

The plastic bags are most prevalent in grocery stores, where customers are now

given a choice of using paper, plastic or a reusable bag purchased at the store or brought from home. Although some grocers such as Whole Foods have banned plastic bags, others such as Safeway say their customers overwhelmingly choose plastic bags over paper or reusable. Many grocers challenge the notion that paper bags are more environmentally friendly than plastic, citing research from the American Chemistry Council showing that plastic bags require less energy to produce, transport and recycle.

"Prohibiting these bags or adding a fee would increase the cost of doing business substantially and would end up being a hidden tax on consumers," said Gregory Ten Eyck, director of government relations for Safeway. "Studies consistently show that paper bags have a larger environmental footprint than plastic bags."

**PLASTIC BAGS** are made from petroleum or natural gas with similar environmental impacts of harvesting fossil fuels, and they are one of the most ubiquitous consumer items on the planet. According to one recent study by a group known as "Toxics in Packaging Clearinghouse," the inks and colorants used on some bags contain toxic levels of lead. Other groups, such as the California-based Earth Resource Foundation have created a "Campaign Against the Plastic Plague" to discourage their use.

"Less than 5 percent of plastic bags are recycled while 52 percent of paper products are recycled, so we really need to compare apples to apples," said Stephanie Barger, founder of Earth Resource Foundation. "We would prefer a stiff fee for the bags rather than an outright ban."

State Sen. Patsy Ticer (D-30) said she is considering introducing legislation similar to the language adopted by the City Council in its legislative packet that would grant jurisdictions the authority to create local bans — a move that some retailers say would add to the environmental footprint by needlessly complicating shipping routes of bags to various localities. Ticer said she agreed with Lovain that the use of plastic bags should be curtailed or eliminated, although she was skeptical about the potential for success with Republicans maintaining control over the House.

"They are bad for the environment, and that's just all there is to it," said Ticer, who is the chairwoman of the Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources Committee. "Ireland banned them long ago, and I'd certainly like to see us minimize their use as much as we can."

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