

Paper or plastic? Both will soon cost 5 cents in D.C.

By Staff and Wire Reports

Shoppers using paper or plastic bags to haul home their groceries will face a 5 cent fee in the District of Columbia for each bag they use, as the district joins the small but growing number of U.S. cities targeting disposable bags as a way to reduce trash.

The District of Columbia Council gave unanimous approval June 2 to legislation aimed at reducing pollution in the Anacostia River and its tributaries by charging a nickel for each disposable bag leaving grocery, drug, convenience and liquor stores. Shoppers can avoid the fee by bringing their own bags.

The fees would take effect in January.

Plastic bags account for nearly half of the trash found in tributaries to the Anacostia, according to a recent report.

A recent Anacostia River Trash Reduction Plan said it would cost District of Columbia residents about \$32.4 million each year to keep trash from reaching the Anacostia. But the plan said the "costs can be greatly reduced with legislative solutions for plastic bags, Styrofoam and beverage cans and bottles."

Under the legislation, businesses could keep a penny for each bag they sold, and the other four cents will go into a fund to clean up the Anacostia. If businesses offer a discount to consumers who bring reusable bags, they could keep 2 cents for each bag sold.

The measure, called the Anacostia River Cleanup and Protection Act, was introduced by Council Member Tommy Wells.

The fee is initially expected to raise about \$3.5 million annually for the Anacostia River cleanup, with the amount shrinking as more residents use their own bags.

Some money would be used to install screens on storm drains to collect garbage. An amendment also calls for D.C. to raise money for the cleanup effort by offering commemorative license plates to residents at a cost of \$25.

A number of jurisdictions have considered bans or fees on disposable bags as a way to reduce garbage in waterways, parks and streets. But many proposals, such as those in neighboring cities like Baltimore and Annapolis, have foundered amid criticism from retailers. Similar measures failed to pass in both the Maryland and Virginia general assemblies this year.

In 2007, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban plastic grocery bags. And plastic bags will be banned from stores in Los Angeles beginning in July 2010. Shoppers will be charged 25 cents for a paper or biodegradable bag.

"Anybody doing any kind of legislation on disposable bags is in the forefront of this issue," said Darby Hoover, a resource specialist with the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council.

About 270 million disposable paper or plastic bags are used in grocery, drug convenience and liquor stores in D.C. each year. That number would drop by half the first year the fee is adopted and by 80 percent within four years, officials estimate.

The District is one of a number of municipalities that have joined the Alice Ferguson Foundation campaign for a "trash-free Potomac." The foundation organizes a Potomac River Cleanup each spring. This year, volunteers at 500 sites in the watershed collected 290 tons of trash, including more than 41,000 plastic bags.

In response to concerns that the fees would place an unfair burden on the poor, the city plans to distribute reusable bags to low-income households.

Critics, though, said money to clean the river should come from the city's existing budget, not from residents struggling during the economic downturn.

"Usually when unemployment is high and people are struggling to find jobs, our elected officials work toward making the cost of living more affordable," said Robert Kabel, chairman of the D.C. Republican Committee. "Today the D.C. Council did the exact opposite."

Various sources contributed to this story

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