

# **West Branch of the Mamaroneck River**





































**Bronx River**















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NATIONAL CENTER FOR POLICY ANALYSIS

## Do Bans on Plastic Grocery Bags Save Cities Money?

Policy Report No. 353

by H. Sterling Burnett

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*Consumers choose plastic bags far more often than paper or reusable bags to carry their purchases. Consumers like the fact that compared to paper and reusable bags, plastic bags are lightweight, strong, flexible and moisture resistant. In addition, they are easy to store and reusable for multiple purposes. Despite these characteristics and their popularity, a growing number of municipalities and some states are enacting laws aimed at reducing the use of plastic (and sometimes paper) grocery bags.*

### Executive Summary



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Consumers choose plastic bags far more often than paper or reusable bags to carry their purchases. Compared to paper and reusable bags, plastic bags are lightweight, strong, flexible and moisture resistant. In addition, they are easy to store and reusable for multiple purposes. Despite these characteristics and their popularity, a growing number of municipalities and some states are enacting laws aimed at reducing the use of plastic (and sometimes paper) grocery bags. The laws range from outright bans to taxes. Advocates have given a number of justifications for placing restrictions on consumers' use of carry-out plastic bags. These include concerns about the scarce resources used to create the bags, environmental harms when they are disposed of improperly, the visible blight of roadside litter, and the cost of disposing or recycling them.

However, an examination of the bag bans and budgets for litter collection and waste disposal in San Francisco, San Jose, and the City and County of Los Angeles, Calif.; Washington, D.C.; and Brownsville and Austin, Texas, shows no evidence of a reduction in costs attributable to reduced use of plastic bags.

**San Francisco.** In 2007, San Francisco became the first city in the nation to ban common, thin-film plastic carryout bags at large grocery stores and pharmacies. In 2012, the city amended the original ban to include all retail stores and food establishments, and added a 10-cent charge on all paper and reusable bags.

Prior to the ban San Francisco City Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi estimated that bag disposal and lost revenue cost the city and the private waste disposal and recycling contractor at least 17 cents per bag, or \$8.49 million annually. However, his estimate lumps paper and plastic bags together, whereas the vast majority of collection and disposal costs are due to paper bags. Plastic bags amount to less than 0.5 percent of the waste stream, and a similarly miniscule amount of landfill space. Paper bags are six times heavier and take up 10 times more space than

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# **Washington, DC study**

**by DOEE  
and Alice Ferguson Foundation**

- **69 percent of businesses said the legislation has had a positive or no impact on them**
- **50 percent of businesses say they've saved money because customers are bringing reusable bags instead of taking store bags. 74 percent of businesses say they've seen an increase in customers bringing their own bags.**
- **Overall, substantial majorities of both residents and business owners and managers support the bag fee personally.**
- **Only eight percent of businesses polled oppose the law after implementation.**







**Survey of 17,000 shoppers leaving stores in  
Montgomery County (has legislation)  
and Prince Georges County (has only education and  
a few incentives)  
Maryland**

**Nearly two-thirds (64.5%) of Montgomery shoppers use at  
least some reusable bags or no bags**

**The comparable figure in Prince Georges is only 12%**

**In Montgomery 60% of shoppers use no disposable bags at  
all.**

**In Prince Georges, only 10%.**

**This difference held when neighborhoods with similar median  
incomes were compared.**



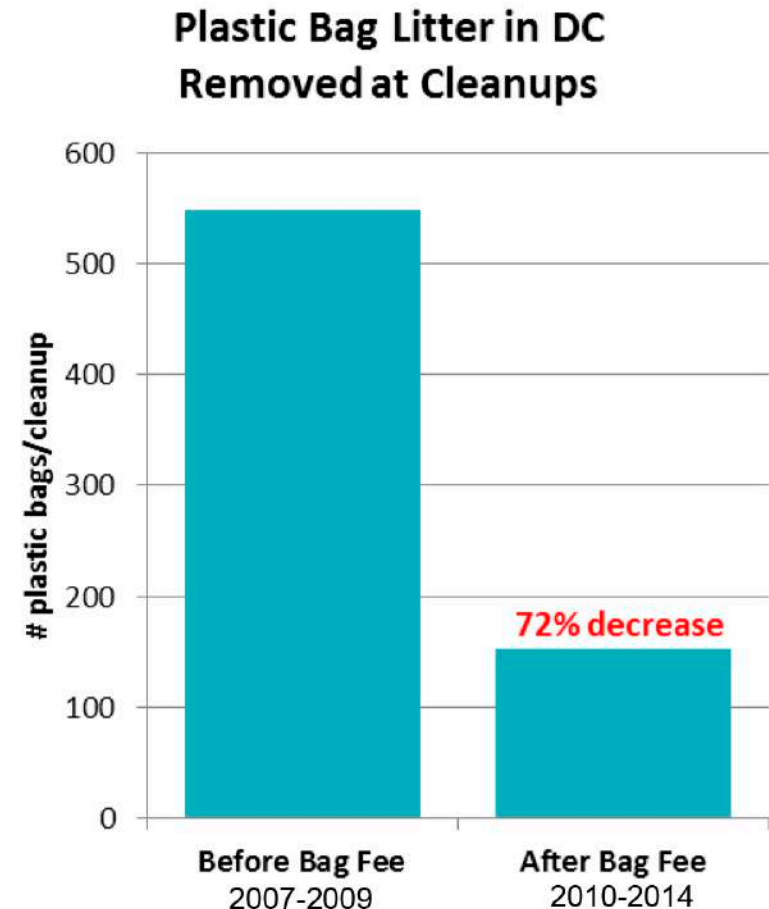
- San Diego estimated used to spend \$160,000 a year cleaning up plastic bag litter.
- Austin TX used to spend \$2300 each day dealing with plastic bag trash and litter.
- San Francisco: \$600,000 in savings from avoided plastic bag waste processing costs. A 10 cent fee on single-use paper bags, helped save \$2.5 million in annual single-use bag recycling & cleanup costs.
- San Jose, CA saved due to its huge reduction in plastic bag cleanup: 89 percent less in storm drain system, 60 % less in creeks and rivers, and 59% less in city streets and neighborhoods.



## Bag Fees at Work: An Analysis of Reductions in Plastic Bags from Potomac River Watershed Cleanups 2007-2014

On January 1, 2010 the region's first five cent bag fee on single-use bags took effect in the District of Columbia. This bag fee affected both paper and plastic single-use bags used at businesses that sell food, such as grocery stores, convenience stores, and take-out. It was created to incentivize consumers to bring reusable bags and to reduce the number of bags that are littered. Not only did the Alice Ferguson Foundation (AFF) see a measurable reduction in the number of littered plastic bags found at cleanups in the District, it saw a 72% reduction based on what volunteers remove at cleanups.

For the last 27 years AFF has organized the [Annual Potomac River Watershed Cleanup](#) in collaboration with hundreds of partners throughout the region. Since its inception, 150,000 volunteers have removed more than 7 million pounds of litter from Potomac Watershed neighborhoods, parks, and waterways. Since 2007 AFF has asked volunteer site leaders to estimate the number of plastic bags removed during their cleanup.





## Number of Plastic Bags Per Cleanup in the District of Columbia

