



*of the Anacostia  
River*

**P.O. Box 4314  
Silver Spring, MD  
20914-4314**

Jim Fary  
President

Suzanne Donohue  
Secretary

Larry Hush  
Treasurer

James Graham

Elaine Lamirande

Alfred Piparato

Carlye Piparato

Glenn Welch

Tiffany Wright

+++++

Edward Murtagh  
Liaison, Friends of  
Sligo Creek

Anne Ambler  
Outreach Chair

[www.neighborsnwb.org](http://www.neighborsnwb.org)

**Testimony in Support of Bill 8-11,  
Excise Tax – Disposable Carryout Bags  
March 28, 2011**

**Neighbors of the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River strongly supports Bill 8-11, which will reduce trash in our roadways, sewers, and waterways by requiring a small fee for disposable carryout bags at the point of sale.**

Neighbors of the Northwest Branch is a nonprofit, citizen-based, all-volunteer organization dedicated to restoring the health of the Northwest Branch, the longest tributary of the Anacostia River. We are intimately familiar with trash.

Who wants to spend a rainy Saturday—or even a sunny Saturday—picking up other people’s trash? Not us. But we devote two Saturday mornings a year, at several sites each time, to picking up what others have discarded near and in the Northwest Branch. On April 9, we will clean trash at six sites, from Randolph Road in Montgomery County down to Queens Chapel Road in Prince Georges County.

**Why we care about trash and why we must reduce it significantly**

On our streets, plastic bags plaster fences, festoon trees, and blow in the wind, potentially blinding drivers. They go down storm sewers into our streams. They are a threat to wildlife, which can become entangled in the bags or mistake plastic flakes for food and starve. Litter discourages investment and lowers property values and tax revenues because it indicates decay, decline, and lack of personal safety. And trash begets trash.

Quite a few Council members, including councilmembers Andrews, Berliner, Ervin, Floreen, Leventhal, Navarro, and Rice, appear to agree and have signed the **Trash Treaty**, pledging a trash-free Potomac by 2013. The hour is late. It is time for action. (Signature listing with dates at the end of this document.)

In addition, our MS4 Clean Water Act permit requires the county to reduce trash significantly. Trash is one of the pollutants for which the EPA has set a “Total Maximum Daily Load” diet, or TMDL, in the Anacostia River. Montgomery County has a proportion of the overall load of trash to reduce. Sending it downstream to Prince Georges County is no longer acceptable.

**Why we support a bag fee**

A significant portion of the trash we extract from the mud and pull down from the trees consists of plastic bags. We support Bill 8-11 because it:

- 1. addresses the problem at its source using effective pocketbook incentives;**
- 2. covers both plastic and paper bags, the best environmental approach;**
- 3. produces resources for conservation while saving the county money; and**
- 4. will have a neutral or positive effect on county businesses.**

1. The reason we have so many plastic bags blowing around is that they are offered for no additional charge. *People do not value what they do not knowingly pay for.* This fee, although minimal, will change people's perception of carryout bags. Ireland reduced its plague of plastic bags 90 percent by applying a fee back in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Plastic bag consumption in the District of Columbia fell 80 percent from 2009 to 2010,<sup>2</sup> and the Alice Ferguson Foundation reports a reduction of 60 percent in bags pulled from the river in April 2010 compared with April 2009.<sup>3</sup> Pocketbook incentives work and are preferable to a ban, which would surely be legally contested. The fee provides an "out" for the person who forgets to bring reusable bags as well as an incentive to remember to bring them next time.

2. Bill 8-11, by applying the fee to both paper and plastic bags, takes the *most environmentally friendly approach.* A "Master Environmental Assessment on Single-Use and Reusable Bags" by ICF International found that paper bags have a greater manufacturing impact than plastic (although a higher recycling rate), while single-use biodegradable bags are no panacea. They contaminate the plastic bag waste stream when people attempt to recycle them, decompose readily only in a composting operation, and tend to become litter.<sup>4</sup>

3. The modest amount of revenue to be generated from this fee will be used *very appropriately for watershed restoration projects in compliance with our MS4 stormwater permit.* In the current budget climate, every million dollars help. Combined with a reduced expense for litter removal, which runs about \$3 million annually, and avoidance of MS4 penalties at up to \$37,500 a day, the savings could be significant.<sup>5</sup>

4. The business experience of the bag charge in the District of Columbia has been generally positive. The Alice Ferguson Foundation hired a professional survey company to randomly survey both residents and businesses and found that 58 percent of the 51 business owners surveyed saw no changes to their business. *Another 20 percent were pleased at having to buy fewer bags and hailed the reduction in litter they had to clean up each day.*<sup>6</sup>

Our experience with trash, plus the experience of jurisdictions that have applied a fee to carryout bags, leads to the conclusion that charging a fee for carryout bags is a wise, appropriate way to reduce trash in our communities and in our waterways. We can expect that this pocketbook-based, market incentive will be much more effective than encouraging people to recycle their bags at the store, which has clearly not worked.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.anacostiaaws.org/userfiles/file/MD\\_bag\\_bill\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.anacostiaaws.org/userfiles/file/MD_bag_bill_fact_sheet.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/23/AR2011022306012.html>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.anacostiaaws.org/userfiles/file/MD\\_bag\\_bill\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.anacostiaaws.org/userfiles/file/MD_bag_bill_fact_sheet.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> [http://greencitiescalifornia.org/sites/all/modules/greencities\\_library/images/MEA.Single%20Use%20Bags.pdf](http://greencitiescalifornia.org/sites/all/modules/greencities_library/images/MEA.Single%20Use%20Bags.pdf), see pp. 3 and 5.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/26/AR2010092603267.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/23/AR2011022306012.html>

**Our communities and our waterways are far too valuable to allow trash to pollute them when we have the means to avoid it. Please take action to reduce litter and vote YES to Bill 8-11—for clean water and healthy communities.**

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Jim Fary, President

Current Montgomery County Council Members who have signed the Trash Treaty, chronologically by date of signing:

Roger Berliner, 6/4/07

Valerie Ervin, 3/21/08

George Leventhal, 6/27/08

Phil Andrews, 10/20/09

Nancy Floreen, 10/28/09

Craig Rice, 10/28/09 (as delegate)

Nancy Navarro (9/10/10)