

Plastic checkout bags in crosshairs again

Tim Wheeler, *Baltimore Sun*: B'More Green, February 15, 2010

Baltimore City Council is scheduled to take another run Tuesday at reducing the proliferation of plastic bag litter around the city.

The council will have a hearing and work session on bills aimed at banning plastic carryout bags altogether or imposing a 25-cent fee on each. The hearing begins at 10 a.m. before the Judiciary and Legislative Investigations Committee, 4th floor of City Hall.

One bill, introduced by Council members James B. Kraft, Mary Pat Clarke and Bill Henry, would bar grocery stores and "formula retail establishments" (aka convenience stores and fast-food chains) from giving customers their merchandise in plastic bags.

Merchants would only be able to put merchandise in recyclable paper bags or reusable bags. Violators would be fined \$250 for a first offense up to \$1,000 for three or more offenses in a six-month period.

The other bill, introduced by Council members Henry, William H. Cole IV, Kraft and Clarke, would require merchants to levy a 25-cent fee on every plastic bag dispensed at carryout. Exceptions would be granted for bagging up fresh fish and meat, candy, cooked foods, dairy products, fruits and nuts and ice.

This isn't the council's first attempt to cut down on plastic bag litter, but supporters note the city is facing a state and federal mandate to do something about the trash littering the harbor, and plastic grocery and takenout bags are a big part of the mess.

How big, no one knows for sure. A separate resolution getting a hearing would commission the city's Department of Public Works to study how much of the city's litter is made up of plastic bags.

In comments submitted prior to the hearing, the city's Commission on Sustainability says disposable plastic and paper bags add to Baltimore's litter and water quality woes. But it says that both banning and slapping a fee on disposable bags would be inconsistent. It supports a fee only if it applies to both disposable plastic and paper bags. A separate bill being reviewed Tuesday would impose the same 25-cent fee on paper bags used for carryout merchandise.

Some other big cities have similarly attacked plastic bag litter, notably San Francisco (ban) and the District of Columbia (fee). DC's was similarly aimed at cleaning up debris fouling the Anacostia River. Legislation has been introduced in Annapolis to regulate and levy a fee on plastic carryout bags statewide.