September 14, 2021

The Honorable Matt de Ferranti, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Support for Plastic Bag Tax Ordinance

Dear Chair de Ferranti,

EcoAction Arlington, Sierra Club's Potomac River Group, and Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions Arlington Hub strongly support a five-cent fee on disposable plastic bags. The proposed fee has broad support in the Arlington Community. In February, EcoAction Arlington submitted a petition signed by over 1,500 residents who supported the adoption of this tax. We greatly appreciate the County's efforts to expedite the process so we can join the City of Alexandria and Fairfax County in launching this fee on January 1, 2022. We would also be catching up with some 471 jurisdictions and eight states with measures banning or taxing plastic bags, including the District of Columbia and Montgomery County, which have had disposable bag fees since 2009 and 2012 respectively.

The list of environmental harms attributable to single-use plastic bags is both long and well-known. They are a common and very unsightly form of litter, conspicuously caught up in trees and other vegetation. Plastic bags are the number one item picked up in Arlington streams, comprising more than 16% of items removed by EcoAction Arlington volunteers for the last nineteen years.[1] They are consumed by turtles and other aquatic creatures, often leading to death by starvation. Plastic bags do not decompose but crumble into smaller and smaller pieces that are now ubiquitous in seafood and in human diets. Those bags that make it to Arlington's trash incinerator produce toxins when they are burned, not all of which are captured by the pollution-control equipment mandated for such waste-to-energy incinerators.

Contrary to some claims, we do not see any evidence that such bag fees impose a regressive tax on low-income households that can ill-afford a new fee, no matter how small.

- According to an Alice Ferguson Foundation 2013 survey, a sizeable majority of residents in the District of Columbia, supported or were indifferent to the disposable bag tax across all Wards, suggesting little or no resulting hardship.
- In fact, low-income residents are more likely to alter their behavior in response to a five-cent fee, especially if they are provided with reusable bags that make fee avoidance easy. We urge the County to provide free reusable bags to SNAP and WIC recipients as allowed by the law.

[1] EcoAction Arlington, "Stream Trash Collected at Three Locations in Arlington County, FY03 through FY21"

Bag fees in the District and Montgomery County have sharply reduced use of plastic bags as well as litter in local parks and streams, promoted the shift to reusable bags, and even saved businesses money.

- Financial reports from the District's Office of Tax and Revenue estimate that bag use dopped from an average of 22.5 million bags per month prior to the start of the fee to 3 million bags a month after the fee was imposed, and District businesses reported a 50 percent decline, on average, in the number of bags they purchased.
- The Alice Ferguson Foundation reports a 72 percent decline in the number of plastic bags collected by volunteers during area clean-ups.
- A Sierra Club study found that residents of Montgomery County were seven times more likely to use reusable bags than residents of Prince George's County, which has not imposed a fee.
- Half of all businesses in the District reported saving money after the fee was imposed.

The revenues generated from this fee would help expand County programs for environmental cleanup, pollution mitigation, and environmental education. We look forward to supporting the County as it rolls out the plastic bag fee in January.

Sincerely,
EcoAction Arlington
Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Arlington Hub
Sierra Club, Virginia Chapter-Potomac River Group

cc: Ms. Katie Cristol, Arlington County Board
Mr. Christian Dorsey, Arlington County Board
Ms. Libby Garvey, Arlington County Board
Mr. Takis Karantonis, Arlington County Board