



September 15, 2020

Montgomery County Council  
100 Maryland Avenue, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Rockville, MD 20850

Re: Bill 32-20, Solid Waste – Waste Reduction/Source Reduction and Single-Use Straws:  
Support with amendment

Dear Councilmembers:

The Sierra Club Montgomery County Group believes strongly that aggressive and continuous actions are needed to reduce the volume of plastic waste and pollution in our county. More than 16 percent of non-recycled waste in Montgomery County is plastic waste and a major portion of that waste is single-use food service-ware and film.<sup>1</sup> The county has been a leader in reducing sources of plastic waste by placing a fee on plastic bags and banning foam food containers.

We are pleased to provide our comments on legislation that will help the County to make even greater strides in tackling the persistent problem of single-use food service plastic waste.

**Bill 32-20**, would require the County Executive (CE) to develop an ongoing waste reduction program which would continue the goals and objectives set out in the county's waste reduction hierarchy and policies. It calls on the CE to search for opportunities to incorporate waste reduction into ongoing and future efforts.

**We strongly support this provision, but request that the CE be required to report annually to the County Council on progress in achieving its waste reduction goals and objectives.** This report should include quantitative source reduction information and be posted on the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) website so that citizens have a better understanding of the progress being made and the types of waste that remain persistent problems. We believe these are important tools to spur behavior change to reduce waste.

Bill 32-20 would also prohibit food service businesses from providing plastic straws to customers, except when necessary to accommodate a medical or disability-related need of that customer. Businesses would be required to post a notice on this policy. The bill lists examples of reusable or compostable straws that could be provided.

**We support the intent of this bill to ban plastic straws, which are not recyclable and are a major component of litter.** Plastic straws and stirrers are the 5<sup>th</sup> most commonly littered material after food wrappers, bottle caps, beverage bottles, and plastic bags<sup>2</sup>. They do not decompose in the natural environment, but eventually break into ever smaller pieces, polluting our waterways and oceans.

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<sup>1</sup>2017 Waste Characterization Study Summary of Results, Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Solid Waste Services, January 29, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Based on analysis of the top 20 items by count from Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup Day, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Marine Debris Tracker, Clean Ocean Action, Project Aware, and Heal the Bay. Source: 5 Gyres, Algalita, Californians Against Waste, Clean Production Action, Plastic Pollution Coalition, Responsible Purchasing Network, Story of Stuff, Surfrider Foundation and UPSTREAM, *Better Alternatives Now, B.A.N. List 2.0, An Analysis and Call-to-Action to Phase Out the Most Polluting Plastic Products Use in the United States*, November 2017, p. 5.

**The ban, however, should be extended to *all* plastic straws, whether derived from petroleum- or plant-based polymers.** This is because straws made from polylactic acid, or PLA, a plant-based polymer, often marketed as biodegradable or compostable, will break down into compost only in an industrial composting facility;<sup>3</sup> they do not break down into compost when littered in the natural environment. Replacing non-compostable plastic straws with these plant-based plastic straws would have virtually no impact on reducing land- or marine-based plastic pollution<sup>4</sup> because they do not break down on land or in the ocean, even after 24 months.<sup>5</sup> In the natural environment, they behave in much the same way as other littered plastic straws.

**To make even greater waste reduction strides, we also recommend that:**

- (1) *plastic stirrers be added to the ban*
- (2) *non-plastic straws and non-plastic stirrers be made available to customers only if the customer requests them – not automatically provided to all customers. Research has shown that this simple change could reduce the number of straws customers use by more than 40 percent, ultimately saving businesses money.*<sup>6</sup>
- (3) *the same principle of “on request” be applied to single-use condiment packets and plastic utensils, providing them only to customers who request them.*

We support giving food service businesses a year to prepare for implementing these important waste reduction measures. It would be helpful for DEP to provide a resource page on its website that includes easily downloadable and printable signs for businesses, frequently-asked-questions, and a list of vendors that carry the appropriate straws.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony and look forward to working with you to strengthen it.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the ASTM D6400 standard. Industrial composting facilities require very specific conditions and high temperatures to break down these plant-based polymers into usable compost.

<sup>4</sup> Source: 5 Gyres, Algalita, Californians Against Waste, Clean Production Action, Plastic Pollution Coalition, Responsible Purchasing Network, Story of Stuff, Surfrider Foundation and UPSTREAM, *Better Alternatives Now, B.A.N. List 2.0, An Analysis and Call-to-Action to Phase Out the Most Polluting Plastic Products Use in the United States*, November 2017, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Better Alternatives Now, B.A.N. List 2.0*, p 34.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner, Travis P. and Patti Toews, *Assessing the Use of Default Choice Modification to Reduce Consumption of Plastic Straws*, *Detritus Journal* (Vol 4, Dec. 2018), pp. 113-121, <https://digital.detritusjournal.com/articles/assessing-the-use-of-default-choice-modification-to-reduce-consumption-of-plastic-straws/167>