

# Environmental Policy Commission Proposed Environmental Action Plan Updates Café 2018

Topic/s: Solid Waste

Accountable City Departments: Transportation & Environmental Services.

**Goal:** Optimize the collection and processing of solid waste to reduce emissions and improve quality of collected recyclables.

**Target:** Establish new target of 42% City-wide combined recycling rate to allow for alternative approaches to glass disposal and reduction of recycling contaminants by 2020.

## Short Term Actions:

1. Conduct cost-benefit analysis on placing a recycling drop-off center on the north side of the City to support recycling at small businesses and locating special containers for only glass at all drop-off centers to improve the recyclability of glass.
2. Launch a "Recycle Right" education campaign to promote and define recycling best practices with a focus on reducing recyclables contamination.
3. Partner with schools to train educators on best recycling habits and processes, and facilitate school outreach by local environmental groups and solid waste disposal providers.
4. Survey businesses and multi-family buildings to determine most effective policies to improve recycling compliance. Interact with landlords and businesses to remove obstacles to compliance with recycling code.

**Implementation Assessment:** The City's ability to implement these recommendations is "HIGH" because the City has the ability to encourage City Code compliance among multi-family buildings and small businesses. The City also has full policy and budgetary control over recycling policies and outreach initiatives, and will be able to fully implement actions corresponding to these areas.

## Justification:

1. *Glass is currently picked up by recycling contractors in Alexandria who—due to technological constraints on recycling—deliver the glass to be used as landfill layering.* Current policy adds unnecessary carbon emissions through redundant transportation of glass to landfill by City recycling contractor. This redundancy also wastes budget resources by paying for two servicers to ultimately deliver glass to landfills.
2. *School recycling rates are lower than those of the general population.* Training educators in solid waste best practices, hosting rich online materials and inviting outreach from local solid-waste disposal providers and environmental groups would improve school recycling rates and expose Alexandria students to essential environmental education.
3. *It is consistent with the City's commitment to addressing climate change.* By signing onto the Mayor's National Climate Action Agreement (MNCAA) in 2017, Alexandria committed to "intensify efforts to meet [its] current climate goals".<sup>1</sup> Smart recycling policies will enable the City to ensure that a maximum amount of solid waste is reused or recycled without unnecessary carbon emissions from redundant or ineffective activities.
4. *Several common recycling practices among Alexandria citizens lead to contamination of recyclables.* Organizing recyclables in plastic bags, mixing food waste in with recyclables, and other undesirable practices greatly impede the sorting and processing of recyclables and contaminate output. Education is necessary to ensure that Alexandria can generate high quality recyclables output, because otherwise a portion of the City's recyclables risk ending up as trash.

## Market Context:

- Fairfax County has recently invested in a state-of-the art glass crusher that is able to convert glass waste into raw material for sand, gravel, and concrete. Fairfax actively solicits Alexandria to funnel glass waste to their crusher to fully leverage this recent acquisition.<sup>2</sup>
- Several market factors limit the demand for Alexandria's recyclables. On a global level, China has severely restricted their market for American recyclables. Technologically, it is not feasible to sort out contaminating plastics from recyclables, and low quality output is difficult to sell as recyclable material.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 382 US Climate Mayors commit to adopt, honor and uphold Paris Climate Agreement goals. <http://climatemayors.org/actions/paris-climate-agreement/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/fairfaxcountyenvironment/photos/pb.115223075220205-2207520000.1505368755/1421835114558988/?type=3>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cleanfairfax.org/2017/09/07/china-and-recycling-in-fairfax-county/>



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**Topic/s:** Solid Waste

**Accountable City Departments:** Transportation & Environmental Services.

**Goal:** Reduce total solid waste collected from City-served residential customers.

**Target:** By 2023, reduce the total solid waste collected from City-served residential customers by 5% compared with 2017 as the baseline.

### Short Term Actions:

1. Evaluate and begin to implement strategies for residents to reduce total waste from convenience packaging, reducing food waste, and composting at home by 2020.
2. Evaluate variable-rate pricing for solid waste collection services to reduce waste and provide greater economic equity for residents by 2018.

**Implementation Assessment:** The City currently is undertaking an update to the overall solid waste strategic plan. This update is looking across a 20-year time-horizon. Based on the recommendations of this plan, the City will have a more comprehensive understanding of areas of the most impact. The implementation of this goal is considered "*Medium*" as it will require education and outreach to consumers and residents. It also may require an update of pricing systems and databases that track residential waste under the variable-rate price scenario. Of importance is the issue of equity and potential unknown economic burdens that may flow from the short term actions.

**Justification:** The 2009 Environmental Action Plan (EAP) called for an excess of 35% diversion through waste reduction and reuse. The goal touched on many principles of waste reduction and reuse such as discouraging the use of plastic water bottles and plastic or single use bags. The idea of needing the involvement of both the residential and the business as well as the development (C&D debris was included as a goal) was all incorporated into this goal. To the City's credit, a pilot project to reduce single use bags was executed shortly after the adoption of the EAP however, it didn't lead to lasting change. The concept of waste diversion was discussed at length by the MSW group. It can be a confusing concept as it may seem interchangeable with an increase in recycling – i.e., you may reduce your household waste if you recycle more. The point of the new goal is not to "shift" one waste stream for another but to reduce the total overall waste generated – this would be all of the waste streams – yard waste, compost, recycling, and other household waste. The goals highlight the areas where this may be most effective – by reducing single-use items and by right-sizing household collection bins.

Of note, the decision for a locality in Virginia to adopt a more stringent plastic-bag tax still rests on the shoulders of our elected officials in Richmond. Every year we seem to get closer and closer to being able to pursue this opportunity however, every year it does not pass. Only last year, a proposal was authored by Sen. Petersen of Fairfax which could have "brought in \$10 million or more annually to help restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed. But the main goal, he said, was to encourage the increased use of reusable and environmentally friendly cloth bags by shoppers."<sup>1</sup>

Even though it seems encouraging that a plastic bag tax may pass at the state level eventually, the City must remain vigilant that we are in support of this measure and it would benefit residents as well as our local waters and help us meet our waste reduction goals. Though plastic bags are flimsy and do not seem to weigh enough to tip our scales into a negative reduction, they remain an important factor. It's important that we look holistically at our waste stream and understand that plastics are created using a non-renewable commodity (oil); jams up recycling streams when recyclables are disposed of in plastic bags or when they are directly added into the stream<sup>2</sup>; mucks up stormwater collection systems; and contributes to the overall amount of plastic pollution in our local and global waters and oceans.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wtop.com/virginia/2017/01/va-senate-committee-kills-proposed-bag-tax/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-plastic-bag-ban-recycling-0731-biz-20150730-story.html>

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Variable-rate pricing is similar to what is also termed “pay as you throw” or “bag-n-tag”. However, this pricing system incorporates all the types of waste streams from residents – municipal solid waste (MSW); yard waste and composting; and recycling. Allowing residents to select the level of service they need for their household may produce efficiencies in waste collection across the City.

**Market Context:** As stated above, a plastic bag tax would be a revenue generator for the City but it would require legislation at the state level as well as Council approval prior to implementation. The current variable price study would help frame up the market context of that potential program update.