



HOWARD COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE

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Date: July 30, 2025

To: Honorable Calvin Ball, County Executive
Honorable Members of the County Council
Liz Walsh, Council Chairperson
Opel Jones, Council Vice Chairperson
Christiana Rigby
Deb Jung
David Yungmann

Through: Rafiu Ighile, Director *RA*
Department of Finance

From: Brenna Punté-Pinos, Assistant Director *BP*
Department of Finance

Subject: Disposable Bag Fee Annual Report – FY2025

Pursuant to Section 20.1307(a) of the Howard County Code (“Studies and Reports”) and in accordance with Section 22.1000 of the Howard County Code (“Reports to the Council”) the Department of Finance jointly with the Office of Community Sustainability shall submit a report to the County Council and the County Executive within 30 days of the end of the Fiscal Year.

The Report should include the following:

- Analysis of the fees collected
- Cost to the County to carry out the subtitle
- Evaluation of the County’s progress in reducing the use of disposable plastic bags and other disposable plastics
- Impact on and responses of the stores that are subject to this subtitle
- Recommendations on changes or alternative approaches to reducing the use of disposable plastic bags and other plastics.

The Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2025 is attached.

CC: Brandee Ganz
Michelle Harrod
Christopher Ashman
Angela Moore
Angela Price
Tim Lattimer

FY25 Annual Disposable Bag Fee Report

In accordance with Sec. 20.1307 of the Howard County Code

Background

CB 64-2019 required that beginning October 1, 2020, Howard County retailers must collect \$0.05 for each disposable plastic bag provided to a customer at the point of sale. There were some exemptions allowed, and these are described in the Implementation section below.

Additional CB64-2019 Requirements:

- Retailers that provide more than 1,000 disposable plastic bags during the quarter must remit \$0.04 for each bag provided on or before the last business day of the calendar quarter.
- The bag fee charged must be itemized on a customer's receipt.
- Stores must post signage notifying customers of the 5-cent fee at checkouts and where carts are kept.
- Retailers must keep their records regarding the bag fee for at least 3 years.

CB 67-2021 implemented a recommendation presented in the FY21 Annual Disposable Bag Fee Report to adjust the payment due dates from the last day of each quarter to the following:

REMITTANCE SCHEDULE FOR QUARTERLY FEES COLLECTED BY STORE:

CALENDAR QUARTER	REMITTANCE ON OR BEFORE THE STORE'S LAST BUSINESS DAY OF:
JANUARY THROUGH MARCH	APRIL
APRIL THROUGH JUNE	JULY
JULY THROUGH SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER
OCTOBER THROUGH DECEMBER	JANUARY

Bag Fee Administration

Howard County's Department of Finance and Office of Community Sustainability (OCS) collaborate closely on managing the Bag Fee Program. Members of each office worked together to design the program and continue to meet quarterly to discuss maintenance, compliance, and outreach efforts.

The Department of Finance pulls a list of businesses each quarter from the State of Maryland that have a trader's license and operate within Howard County. The businesses that are added each quarter are sent a letter with their Bag Fee Customer Number, information about the Bag Fee Program, what the business needs to do to ensure compliance with the Bag Fee Program, as well as the contact information for the Bag Fee Program Administrator, who is the main point of contact to help businesses comply with the law.

The Bag Fee Program Administrator is proactive in reaching out to businesses that are not compliant via email, phone, or in-person visits to the location, and also responds to emails and phone calls that come in through the bag fee email, bagfee@howardcountymd.gov or phone number 410-313-4063.

Compliance

Retailers are considered in compliance if they have remitted payment or submitted one of the 3 exemption forms. Closed businesses are also included as compliant. Several times a month the Bag Fee Program Administrator and compliance vendor visits businesses that are not in compliance; these visits often produce compliance in the form of exemption forms and/or payment of fees collected. If a business remains non-compliant after multiple visits, a Notice of Violation is issued and can result in a Civil Citation (as of FY25, only one business has required this level of enforcement).

To educate stores about the program and increase compliance in the program, Howard County hired a compliance vendor. The compliance vendor is a contractor and the same vendor utilized by the Health Department for tobacco point of sale inspections/enforcement. During the compliance visit, the contractor makes note of signs & fee collection. Additionally, they provide an explanation of the exemptions and an information packet (program summary & FAQs) as necessary.

The Bag Fee Program Administrator and compliance vendor visited an estimated 190 retailers in FY25. This number decreased from FY24 due to a temporary vacancy in the Bag Fee Program Administrator position.

The Bag Fee Program Administrator also investigates stores when members of the public submit information with their experiences in stores. Residents are encouraged to submit concerns to the Finance Department through an email to bagfee@howardcountymd.gov or by calling 410-313-4603. Both can be found on the [Howard County Disposable Bag Fee webpage](#), which also includes "Contact Us" information at the top.

As of July 2025, all of the large stores in Howard County are in compliance and remitting the bag fee. Compliance rates are more variable in small stores, stores that are eligible for an exemption, and when businesses either close or are new to the program. County staff actively work with stores to become compliant retroactively by paying past remittances and late fees. When a store becomes compliant retroactively, previous quarters' data are updated accordingly.

Compliance rates are as follows:

<u>Reporting Period</u>	<u>Compliance %</u>
FY21	
FY21 2Q (10/1/2020 – 12/31/2020)	97.80%
FY21 3Q (1/1/2021 – 3/31/2021)	97.70%
FY21 4Q (4/1/2021 – 6/30/2021)	97.59%
FY22	
FY22 1Q (7/1/2021 – 9/30/2021)	96.06%
FY22 2Q (10/1/2021 – 12/31/2021)	95.99%
FY22 3Q (1/1/2022 – 3/31/2022)	95.81%
FY22 4Q (4/1/2022 – 6/30/2022)	95.02%
FY23	
FY23 1Q (7/1/2022 – 9/30/2022)	91.13%
FY23 2Q (10/1/2022 – 12/31/2022)	93.38%
FY23 3Q (1/1/2023 – 3/31/2023)	92.68%
FY23 4Q (4/1/2023 – 6/30/2023)	92.04%
FY24	
FY24 1Q (7/1/2023 – 9/30/2023)	87.22%
FY24 2Q (10/1/2023 – 12/31/2023)	86.20%
FY24 3Q (1/1/2024 – 3/31/2024)	85.91%
FY24 4Q (4/1/2024 – 6/30/2024)	84.18%
FY25	
FY24 1Q (7/1/2024 – 9/30/2024)	77.89%
FY24 2Q (10/1/2024 – 12/31/2024)	76.19%
FY24 3Q (1/1/2025 – 3/31/2025)	75.71%
FY24 4Q (4/1/2025 – 6/30/2025)	70.60%

	<u>FY25*</u>	<u>FY24</u>	<u>FY23</u>	<u>FY22</u>	<u>FY21</u>
Total Customers in Program	3,816	3,660	3,480	3,273	2,825
Total Program Exempt Customers	1002	985	939	823	611
Total Annual Exemption forms received	682	908	1094	1171	1119
Total Quarterly Minimum Exemption forms received	297	480	589	713	638

* Compliance % and program totals as of 7/29/2025. Please note FY25 4Q due date is 7/31/2025.

Bag Fee Revenue and Costs

Fees Collected by Reporting Period as of 7/29/2025

Reporting Period	Total Dollars*	Total Bags
	FY21	
FY21 2Q (10/1/20 – 12/31/20)	\$210,587.12	5,165,023
FY21 3Q (1/1/21 – 3/31/21)	\$177,020.54	4,387,000
FY21 4Q (4/1/21 – 6/30/21)	\$184,142.20	4,572,523
FY21 Totals to date	\$571,749.86	14,124,546
	FY22	
FY22 1Q (7/1/21 – 9/30/21)	\$206,461.23	5,128,841
FY22 2Q (10/1/21 – 12/31/21)	\$232,211.05	5,857,317
FY22 3Q (1/1/22 – 3/31/22)	\$178,322.80	4,447,505
FY22 4Q (4/1/22 – 6/30/22)	\$173,214.91	4,321,501
FY22 Totals to date	\$790,209.99	19,755,164
	FY23	
FY23 1Q (7/1/22 – 9/30/22)	\$154,375.51	3,850,444
FY23 2Q (10/1/22 – 12/31/22)	\$178,306.66	4,446,959
FY23 3Q (1/1/23 – 3/31/23)	\$153,259.09	3,825,727
FY23 4Q (4/1/23 – 6/30/23)	\$156,153.48	3,897,692
FY23 Totals to date	\$642,094.74	16,020,822
	FY24	
FY24 1Q (7/1/23 – 9/30/23)	\$158,882.52	3,968,815
FY24 2Q (10/1/23 – 12/31/23)	\$172,192.18	4,296,316
FY24 3Q (1/1/24 – 3/31/24)	\$158,234.85	3,951,034
FY24 4Q (4/1/24 – 6/30/24)	\$158,895.09	3,963,828
FY24 Totals to date	\$648,204.64	16,179,993
	FY25	
FY25 1Q (7/1/24 – 9/30/24)	\$159,411.57	3,984,241
FY25 2Q (10/1/24 – 12/31/24)	\$186,188.14	4,650,915
FY25 3Q (1/1/25 – 3/31/25)	\$153,359.70	3,833,091
FY25 4Q (4/1/25 – 6/30/25)	\$183,421.42	4,585,496
FY25 Totals to date	\$682,380.83	17,053,743

*Includes total late fees collected to date: \$11,764.57

FY25 Program Expenditures as of 7/29/2025

<u>FY2025 Expense Summary</u>	
<u>Expense</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Salaries and Fringe (Finance)	\$77,031.93
Salaries and Fringe (Sustainability)	\$164,514.14
Supplies and Materials	\$16,585.03
Contractual/Security Services (Finance)	\$7,462.98
Contractual Services (Other Sustainability Projects)	\$152,542.92
Contractual Services (Grants)	\$519,508.66
Total	\$937,645.66

Reducing Plastic Bag Use

Based on what County staff have observed in stores, consumer and retailer behavior has changed since implementation of the fee. Stores routinely ask if customers want bags, and customers also often decline bags when they have a smaller number of items. More customers appear to have gotten into the habit of taking their own reusable bags when they shop.

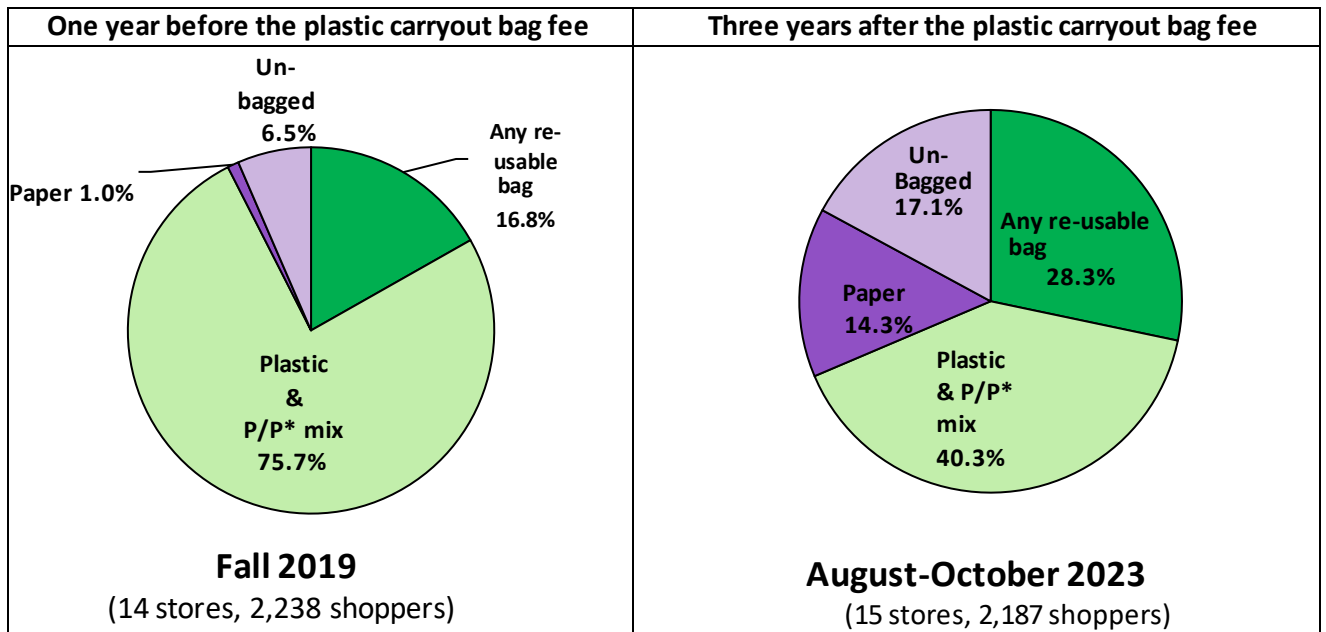
Some stores have started offering paper bags as an option instead of plastic bags and some grocery stores offer both paper and plastic. Some stores charge for paper bags, which are not reported to or collected by the County.

As shown in the chart above, the overall trend is that bag use has continued to decline since the bag fee started. FY21 only had 3 quarters of the program but can be reasonably estimated at 18,751,124, using an average of the existing three FY21 quarters (4,6877,81). The biggest drop in reported bag use was between FY22 and FY23. FY23 and FY24 had more modest drops in disposable bag use. FY25 data is still being collected. It is unknown what the disposable bag usage was before implementing the bag fee, so it is difficult to know the overall reduction as compared to before the bag fee.

Local Group Research Showed Marked Decline in the Rate of Shoppers' Use of Plastic Bags

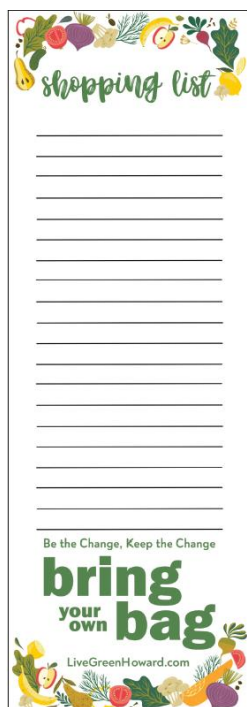
In FY24, the Howard County Sierra Club Zero Waste Team and Less Plastic Please conducted observational surveys of shoppers' bag use in grocery stores a year before (in 2019) and three years after (in 2023) the plastic bag fee was instituted. Their survey and April 2024 report showed that single use plastic bag usage among shoppers dropped from 75.7% in 2019 to 40.3% in 2023, a decline of nearly half from levels seen before the plastic bag fee took effect. Paper bag usage, reusable bag usage and shoppers who use no bags also increased, as shown in their pie charts below.

Figure 1: Distribution of shoppers at four Howard County grocery chains according to their choice of carryout bag, before and after the 5-cent plastic bag fee (% of shoppers)



* P/P mix= Plastic paper mix

In FY25, Howard County staff continued to work with Less Plastics Please and the Sierra Club. These residents wanted to help educate the public about reducing single-use plastic bags. If there are complaints about stores, the Bag Fee Administrator contacts the retailers to correct any problems as soon as possible. On the recommendation of the Sierra Club/LPP group, Howard County Office of Community Sustainability staff created a shopping list as a reminder to bring your own bag, pictured below. Two hundred notepads were given to the group to give out in promoting reusable bags and 300 are being used by OCS as giveaways at public events.



Reusable Bags

Money collected from the bag fee by Howard County is kept separate from general funds and put into a special Disposable Plastics Reduction Fund. One of the approved uses of the fund is to provide reusable bags “predominantly to vulnerable individuals.” In FY25, OCS increased the number of non-profit groups participating in reusable bag distribution by 33%.

Since the beginning of the program, Howard County has provided 25,536 reusable grocery bags to Howard County residents:

Reusable Bag Distribution Summary	
<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Number of bags</u>
FY21	2,500
FY22	2,500
FY23	2,336
FY24	6,200
FY25	12,000
Total	25,536

The Office of Community Sustainability continues to partner with non-profit groups to supply bags to those in need, expanding the number of partner organizations. In FY2025, 12,000 bags were provided to the following organizations, most of which provide the bags with their food distribution programs:

- 1,500 bags to Howard County Food Bank, Community Action Council of Howard County
- 1,000 bags to Indian Cultural Association of Howard County
- 1,000 bags to Elkridge Food Pantry
- 1,000 bags to Columbia Community Care
- 1,200 bags to Roving Radish meal kit program
- 4,800 bags to Oakland Mills Interfaith Green Team
- 500 bags to Howard Community College’s Fueling Dragons food pantry
- 500 bags to the Howard County Muslim Council
- 500 bags to Howard County Office of Community Sustainability for distribution at tabling events

What Partners Are Saying

“Thank you so very much, again. This will really make a big difference in what I have to spend on food this year!” -- HCC Fueling Dragons Food Pantry coordinator

“We are so excited that the reusable bags have been delivered. They will be a tremendous help for our upcoming food drives. Thank you so much for all your efforts in assisting community partners give back in a sustainable way.” -- Howard County Muslim Council

Photos of the reusable bags in use at area food distribution sites during FY25 can be found at <https://livegreenhoward.com/recycling-waste/plastic-bag-fee/>.

Plastics Reduction and Environmental Protection (PREP) Grants

The Bag Fee Legislation calls for funds to be used by Howard County for environmental purposes including providing grants to local groups. The Office of Community Sustainability created the PREP grant program in 2021, along with a webpage to explain how to apply and to highlight the community projects. Project results are also routinely promoted through the Live Green Howard social media and e-newsletter. Summaries of the 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024 projects and general information about the grant program can be found at <https://livegreenhoward.com/recycling-waste/plastic-bag-fee/prep-grants/>.

PREP grant funding supports community projects, including plastic reduction education and outreach, community cleanups, waste reduction, student educational opportunities, green workforce development, Climate Forward Plan implementation, and improves non-profit group capacity to implement environmental action.

The first four years of PREP grants dispersed \$1,476,333, funding a total of 48 projects. As of July 2025, 18 organizations have applied for the 2025 PREP grants (FY26 funding). The 2025 PREP grant applications are being processed and will be underway by September 2025. The estimated total amount to be awarded in FY26 is approximately \$430,000 of the \$651,000 requested by the potential grantees. The 2025 grants will bring the cumulative total PREP grant expenditure to roughly \$2 million. This expenditure has made a significant impact in Howard County.

Each year's PREP grant amounts are as follows:

Year	Number of Projects	Amount Funded
FY 2022	11	\$243,165
FY 2023	11	\$364,347
FY 2024	10	\$349,312
FY 2025	16	\$519,508

The following local non-profit organizations have received PREP grants:

- Clean Water Fund
- Community Ecology Institute
- Friends of Patapsco Valley State Park Ltd.
- Howard Community College
- Howard County Chinese School
- Howard County Conservancy
- Howard EcoWorks
- Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake
- Murray Hill HOA
- Oakland Mills Interfaith Center
- Patapsco Heritage Greenway
- Residences at Vantage Point
- Resurrection St. Paul School
- Savage Community Association
- Therapeutic and Recreational Riding Center
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

- Upcycled
- Volunteers

PREP Grant 2024 Community Impacts (FY25)

In FY25, \$519,508 funded 16 local, non-profit grantees to complete waste reduction and other environmental projects. These grants enabled local non-profits to support green job creation and accomplish projects such as reducing single-use plastics, reducing food waste, tree planting, water quality monitoring, climate education and outreach activities, and helping congregations to use solar energy and become more energy efficient. Descriptions of the projects can be found below and are posted on Live Green Howard website. Project successes and opportunities for the public to participate are shared with the community through social media and newsletters.

Waste Reduction and Beyond

More than a quarter of the PREP grant projects provide solutions for single-use plastics, such as installing water bottle-filling stations at community buildings, replacing disposables with reusable dining service containers, and providing reusable grocery bags to the community.

Almost 20 percent of PREP grant projects address food waste through composting programs, food rescue initiatives, and/or food waste reduction education initiatives.

Targeted Environmental Education & Engagement

Environmental education and engagement is an important part of boosting public awareness and fostering waste-conscious consumers who shop consistently with their own reusable bags. PREP projects fulfill a need for climate and environmental education at all ages and stages in the community. More than three-quarters of current grantees provide some form of environmental education and outreach. The programs reach youth at all levels of the Howard County Public School System, faith-based organizations, neighborhoods and smaller communities, and underserved populations such as those with disabilities.

Serving the Underserved

Beyond environmental objectives, many PREP projects fulfill needs among the community's underserved populations. From growing and donating local produce to Howard County food pantries to administering free after school educational programs for students at Title 1 schools, PREP grants address the goals of Climate Forward while meeting community needs.

Environmental Reach

PREP projects span geographically across Howard County and provide climate solutions in a wide range of areas including and beyond waste reduction, such as energy, nature, watershed health, ecosystem services, regenerative agriculture and more.

FY25 PREP Grant Project Summaries

Community Ecology Institute

Project: Cultivating Climate Friendly Food Choices

This grant promotes locally grown, plant-rich diets to achieve positive impacts for climate, health, and community resilience. CEI provides experiential education on growing local food through their Nourishing Gardens program and Freetown farm-based service-learning initiatives. CEI supports accessible, local, regeneratively grown food for the community, especially the food insecure, through collaborative partnerships and food distribution. To promote food waste reduction, CEI offers free workshops to the community on strategies to reduce food waste and properly use Howard County's green bin curbside compost bins.

Friends of Patapsco Valley State Park

Project: Patapsco Valley State Park Mobile Visitor Center

This grant supports hands-on outreach and education opportunities within the state park through the Mobile Visitor Center and after-school BioBlitz programs at 13 elementary schools within the Howard County Public School System. The Mobile Visitor Center provides litter prevention education in Howard County sections of state parks, including by bilingual park rangers. The BioBlitz program provides students with a basic scientific introduction to the concept of biodiversity.

Howard County Chinese School

Project: Youth Plastic Reduction & Environmental Protection Program

This grant focused on reducing single-use plastics and enhancing environmental education. The group also maintains two gardens tended by youth volunteers in Columbia and Highland, donating food to community organizations with hunger relief programs. Students also work on rain barrel projects for Howard County residents. The group conducts quarterly litter cleanups and continues their plastic reduction campaign to educate the public about the environmental impact of plastic bags.

Howard County Conservancy

Project: Hands-on Climate Education for Howard County Secondary Students

Howard County Conservancy provides hands-on climate education opportunities for middle and high school students in the Howard County Public School System via four Conservancy programs: Climate kNOWledge, Climate STEPS, the Watershed Report Card, and the Youth Climate Institute.

Climate kNOWledge provides 12 climate science lessons and a culminating field experience for 4,000 6th grade students. Ninth grade students are the audience of the Watershed Report Card – now in its 11th year – and a new pilot program called Climate Sustainability through Empowered and Proactive Solutions (Climate STEPS), a program that includes student-driven action projects, professional development for teachers, and field trips. The Youth Climate Institute’s continued expansion provides foundational climate training and participation in civic action for at least 130 high school students.

Howard EcoWorks

Project: Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Vulnerable Communities

Howard EcoWorks will implement environmental restoration activities that enhance ecosystem services, support habitat connectivity for pollinators and wildlife, and build climate and community resilience while building partnerships with vulnerable communities in Howard County.

Supporting 10 green jobs and engaging community volunteers, the project includes the planting of 350 trees and understory species; the installation of 500 square feet of native gardens, meadows and vernal pools; stream enhancement; native seed collection and propagation; and the management of one acre of forest.

Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake

Project: Strengthening Watershed Protection Partnerships

This grant engages non-profit groups through one-one-one coaching sessions and tools to address waste reduction and energy conservation. IPC also hosts Learning Labs to engage Howard County congregations with environmental action opportunities in Howard County, including waste reduction “kits.”

Interfaith Power & Light

Project: Helping Howard County Congregations Save Energy and Shift to Clean Power

This project engages faith communities in Howard County to effectively reduce and avoid greenhouse gas emissions by enabling congregational facility energy assessments, clean energy upgrades, and deployment of congregational solar projects. Utilizing established and new relationships with Howard County congregations, IPL provides one-on-one support for energy upgrades and solar projects and providing energy and climate education to congregation members.

Murray Hill Homeowner Association

Project: Murray Hill 2024 Community Cleanliness Project

This HOA is working to reduce neighborhood litter and promote community cleanliness. To reduce the number of exposed trash bags at the curb, the community purchased 50 sturdy, lidded trashcans to provide for community member use. Murray Hill HOA hosts two community volunteer cleanups events during the year and provides a paid stipend to neighborhood youth for weekly litter cleanup and emptying of community-shared trash cans.

Oakland Mills Interfaith Center

Project: The Greening of Oakland Mills Interfaith Inc.

This grant supports environmental education, waste minimization, rain gardens, and other stormwater management practices. OMI will provide composting and education, distribution of reusable shopping bags, planting trees and shrubs onsite, an environmental fair, native plant promotion, and continued teaching of environmentally conscious practices, including workshops for using rain barrels.

Patapsco Heritage Greenway

Project: Water Quality Monitoring and Education in the Patapsco Watershed

This grant supports monitoring water quality twice monthly at 11 sites in the non-tidal Patapsco River watershed area from Woodbine to Elkridge. PHG will also be adding a 12th monitoring site at a tributary of Deep Run in Jessup, where clean-ups and invasive plant removals have been conducted. Monitoring results are used for environmental education and reported to state programs.

Residences at Vantage Point

Project: Reusable Meal Containers

During routine operations of the retirement community, residents utilize approximately 90 takeaway containers per day throughout the community's dining venues. This grant allows Residences at Vantage Point to significantly reduce the use of single-use plastics by purchasing plastic reusable containers as replacements. This PREP grant funds the purchase of Eco-Containers to-go containers in three styles: three compartment to-go boxes, soup containers, and square to-go boxes.

Resurrection St. Paul School

Project: Pollinator Walk and Garden

This grant funds installation of a 2,500 square foot pollinator walk and garden on the school's 22-acre campus in Ellicott City. The goals of the pollinator garden are to beautify the campus, increase native biodiversity, increase pollination services and biological control of pest insects, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and provide community engagement and learning opportunities for students, teachers, and parishioners.

Therapeutic and Recreational Riding Center

Project: Therapeutic Garden Renovation

A new PREP grantee in 2024, the Therapeutic and Recreational Riding Center (TRRC) is working to restore and expand an outdoor garden and learning space designed for people with special needs. TRRC is engaging master gardeners and other community volunteers in the renovation, expansion, and upkeep of the therapeutic garden.

Once complete, the renovated garden will provide children and adults challenged by physical, mental, and emotional disabilities with a safe space and educational resources for learning about gardening, healthy foods, safe water, and how to recognize and respond to the challenges of climate change in their daily lives.

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Project: Bottle-Filling Water Station at Owen Brown Interfaith Center

This grant supported the installation of a bottle-filling water station to reduce single-use plastics at the Owen Brown Interfaith Center. The building hosts many meetings, classes, and religious gatherings weekly, and is rented for weddings, parties, showers, and other events year-round. A bottle-filling water station at OBIC will be utilized by hundreds of people each week and will discourage the usage of single-use plastics at events hosted at OBIC.

Upcycled

Project: Waste to Wonder

This grant supports “upcycling” used polypropylene (#5) and HDPE (#2) plastic into lumber and interlocking brick to make a variety of structures including benches, tables, sheds and flower beds.

Upcycled offers community collection sites for these plastics at Freetown Farm and Savage Mill. Their goal is to collect 2,000 pounds of plastic from Howard County residents and donate 1,000 pounds of upcycled lumber products to Howard County schools and community spaces. Upcycled cleans, sorts and shreds plastic into flakes, then heats and pressurizes into a lumber or brick mold.

Upcycled also hosts environmental cleanups at various Howard County parks and trails and provides community outreach to educate residents about the importance of reducing single-use plastics.

Volunteers

Project: Saving Food from the Landfill

This grant funds food waste reduction and supports local agriculture while providing hunger relief. Volunteers partners with local farms to purchase excess produce unsold at Howard County farmers markets to feed the local community through donations to Columbia Community Care and Roving Radish.

Produce is being collected using reused cardboard boxes to eliminate plastic packaging and transported to hunger relief partners via an electric vehicle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Other Environmental Initiatives

FY25 Other Contractual Services funds have supported OCS-led waste reduction projects and implementing the Climate Forward Climate and Resiliency Plan. The total FY25 environmental projects expenditure was \$169,127.95.

FY25 projects included:

- A grant to the Chesapeake Bay Trust to support two Chesapeake Conservation and Climate Corps members who work full time with OCS working on a variety of environmental projects, including direct support of the Climate Forward plan implementation.
- Native plant demonstrations including under solar panels at the East Columbia Campus.
- An electric landscape equipment conversion pilot at Savage Park to reduce air pollution.
- Waste reduction outreach and education.
- Distributing reusable bags to vulnerable communities through local food programs.
- Studying waste reduction at community events, including Wine in the Woods.

- Purchasing metal water bottles for campers in Howard County Recreation & Parks programming as part of Plastic Free July.

The bag fee also supports two positions in the Office of Community Sustainability, our Climate Action Coordinator and our Community Outreach Specialist. These staff members are crucial to implementing the bag fee program, single-use plastics and waste reduction outreach, litter prevention, the PREP grant, and obtaining and implementing outside grants.

Community Outreach Specialist

- Leads implementation of the PREP grant including applications, project reports, budget accounting for each grant, and assisting grantees to ensure their success.
- Coordinates design, purchase, and distribution of the reusable bags to underserved communities.
- Leads public outreach and education on waste reduction and all sustainability topics. Direct responsibilities include all OCS social media and our monthly newsletter
- Leads the annual 20 Minute Cleanup, a county-wide litter reduction project.
- Leads outreach to community groups to amplify messaging.
- Coordinates and attends public events, including tabling.
- Supports the Environmental Sustainability Board.

Climate Action Coordinator

- Primary staff person dedicated to overall implementation of the 2023 Climate Action Plan.
- Leads the Climate Subcabinet Waste Workgroup
- Leads efforts to improve procurement policies to reduce waste through County government policies and contract language
- Leads the Plastic Reduction Law outreach and implementations.
- Pursues and implements grant projects, including the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) climate literacy training initiative (\$160,000), two street tree grants from the Chesapeake Bay Trust (CBT) (\$192,385), and multiple projects from the Clean Energy and Community Development (CECD) grant from the Maryland Energy Administration (MEA) (\$70,000).
- Coordinates the submission of IRS Elective Pay refunds (\$248,903).

Conclusions

- Complaints about the bag fee program have been minimal in FY25.
- The reduced number of phone calls and emails with complaints and questions likely indicate that paying for plastic bags is commonplace and accepted in Howard County.
- Failure to complete exemption forms or provide a response is the leading cause of non-compliance.
- The Bag Fee Administrator and educational consultant continue to work with stores on compliance and to keep the vendor list up to date.
- The Office of Community Sustainability is using the bag fee funds for environmental purposes, primarily through the Plastics Reduction and Environmental Protection Grant program.

Recommendations

- Stay abreast of changes from state regarding banning disposable plastic bags.
- Revisit disposable plastic bag definition to include thicker plastic bags (i.e. CVS, Sprouts, etc.).
- Coordinate with local environmental groups over the next year to determine if there has been a noted decrease in plastic bags in streams and waterways.