



HOWARD COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE

3430 Court House Drive Ellicott City, Maryland 21043

410-313-2195

Rafiu O. Ighile, CPA, CGMA, MBA
Director of Finance
righile@howardcountymd.gov

FAX 410-313-4064
TDD 410-313-2323

Date: July 30, 2026

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

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

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

Subject: Disposable Bag Fee Annual Report – FY2026

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 2026 is attached.

CC: Brandee Ganz
Michelle Harrod
Janine McGregor
Angela Moore
Angela Price
Leah Miller

FY26 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.

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 160 retailers in FY26. This number decreased from FY25 due to a temporary vacancy with the contractual outreach 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 2026, 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. For example, in Q4 of 2025, Giant made an over payment error which has since been refunded and the data updated since last year's report. This

continuous effort by the Bag Fee Administrator to work with companies to get them in compliance is reflected in the following charts that show higher compliance in past years.

Compliance by Reporting Period

<u>Reporting Period</u>	<u>Compliance %</u>
FY21	
FY21 2Q (10/1/2020 – 12/31/2020)	96.13%
FY21 3Q (1/1/2021 – 3/31/2021)	96.09%
FY21 4Q (4/1/2021 – 6/30/2021)	95.98%
FY22	
FY22 1Q (7/1/2021 – 9/30/2021)	95.53%
FY22 2Q (10/1/2021 – 12/31/2021)	95.43%
FY22 3Q (1/1/2022 – 3/31/2022)	95.94%
FY22 4Q (4/1/2022 – 6/30/2022)	95.52%
FY23	
FY23 1Q (7/1/2022 – 9/30/2022)	94.11%
FY23 2Q (10/1/2022 – 12/31/2022)	93.90%
FY23 3Q (1/1/2023 – 3/31/2023)	93.23%
FY23 4Q (4/1/2023 – 6/30/2023)	92.78%
FY24	
FY24 1Q (7/1/2023 – 9/30/2023)	88.70%
FY24 2Q (10/1/2023 – 12/31/2023)	87.78%
FY24 3Q (1/1/2024 – 3/31/2024)	87.63%
FY24 4Q (4/1/2024 – 6/30/2024)	86.12%
FY25	
FY25 1Q (7/1/2024 – 9/30/2024)	80.44%
FY25 2Q (10/1/2024 – 12/31/2024)	79.22%
FY25 3Q (1/1/2025 – 3/31/2025)	78.72%
FY25 4Q (4/1/2025 – 6/30/2025)	77.96%

FY26	
FY26 1Q (7/1/2025 – 9/30/2025)	71.73%
FY26 2Q (10/1/2025 – 12/31/2025)	71.11%
FY26 3Q (1/1/2026 – 3/31/2026)	70.37%
FY26 4Q (4/1/2026 – 6/30/2026)	66.97%

Total Customers and Exemption Activity by Fiscal Year

	<u>FY26*</u>	<u>FY25</u>	<u>FY24</u>	<u>FY23</u>	<u>FY22</u>	<u>FY21</u>
Total Customers in Program	4,045	3,816	3,660	3,480	3,273	2,825
Total Program Exempt Customers	1,040	1,002	985	939	823	611
Total Annual Exemption forms received	459	685	908	1,094	1,206	1,220
Total Quarterly Minimum Exemption forms received	177	389	480	589	713	718

* Compliance % and program totals as of 7/30/2026. Please note FY26 4Q due date is 7/31/2026.

Bag Fee Revenue and Costs

Fees Collected by Reporting Period as of 7/30/2026

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)	\$172,832.00	4,321,207
FY22 Totals to date	\$789,827.08	19,745,870
	FY23	
FY23 1Q (7/1/22 – 9/30/22)	\$154,454.11	3,851,944
FY23 2Q (10/1/22 – 12/31/22)	\$178,383.46	4,448,459
FY23 3Q (1/1/23 – 3/31/23)	\$153,642.00	3,835,021
FY23 4Q (4/1/23 – 6/30/23)	\$156,153.48	3,897,692
FY23 Totals to date	\$642,633.05	16,033,116
	FY24	
FY24 1Q (7/1/23 – 9/30/23)	\$158,982.52	3,970,815
FY24 2Q (10/1/23 – 12/31/23)	\$171,923.78	4,289,350
FY24 3Q (1/1/24 – 3/31/24)	\$158,655.05	3,961,000
FY24 4Q (4/1/24 – 6/30/24)	\$158,866.05	3,962,260
FY24 Totals to date	\$648,427.40	16,183,425
	FY25	
FY25 1Q (7/1/24 – 9/30/24)	\$159,684.59	3,990,184
FY25 2Q (10/1/24 – 12/31/24)	\$187,892.74	4,657,209
FY25 3Q (1/1/25 – 3/31/25)	\$155,033.99	3,847,599
FY25 4Q (4/1/25 – 6/30/25)	\$147,744.55	3,691,377
FY25 Totals to date	\$650,355.51	16,184,639
	FY26	
FY26 1Q (7/1/25 – 9/30/25)	\$145,128.19	3,626,868
FY26 2Q (10/1/25 – 12/31/25)	\$145,753.87	3,641,181
FY26 3Q (1/1/26 – 3/31/26)	\$174,855.33	4,370,826**
FY26 4Q (4/1/26 – 6/30/26)	\$139,574.56	3,489,370
FY26 Totals to date	\$605,311.95	15,128,245

*Includes total late fees collected to date: \$12,250.60

**The Department of Finance is awaiting confirmation from a large retailer of the number of bags reported for FY26 3Q due to a significant increase compared to previously reported periods.

FY26 Program Expenditures as of 7/30/2026

FY2026 Expense Summary	
<u>Expense</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Salaries and Fringe (Finance)	\$117,420.71
Salaries and Fringe (Sustainability)	\$121,762.34
Data Processing Services chargeback (Finance)	\$10,057.00
Supplies and Materials (Finance and Sustainability)	\$22,314.78
Contractual/Security Services (Finance)	\$2,520.00
Contractual Services (Other Sustainability Projects)	\$57,048.15
Contractual Services (Grants)	\$424,724.06
Total	\$755,847.04

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 adapted into the habit of taking their own reusable bags when they shop.

Some stores offer 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.

The Office of Community Sustainability leverages its outreach platforms (Live Green Howard newsletter and social media) to encourage waste reduction practices such as reusable bag use and limiting use of single-use plastics.

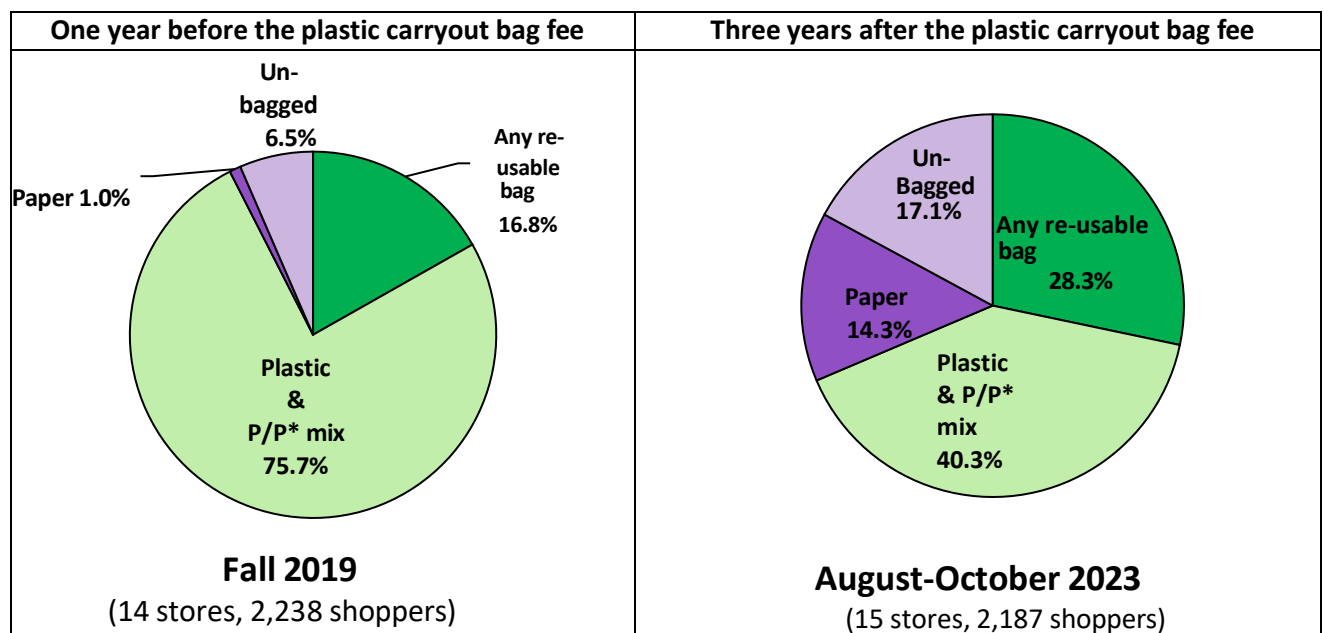
The overall trend is that bag use has declined since the bag fee started. The biggest drop in reported bag use was between FY22 and FY23. FY23, FY24, and FY25 had more modest drops in disposable bag use. FY21 only had 3 quarters of the program but can be reasonably estimated at 18,751,124, using an average of the existing three FY21 quarters (4,687,781). FY26 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.

Anecdotally, Howard County residents have shared that plastic bags are now less prevalent as roadside litter. One resident who is a long-time participant in routine litter cleanup efforts noted in spring 2026 that plastic bags are hardly found on his monthly cleanups; “We aren’t really seeing many plastic bags at all, and even some of the ones we pick up look like they may have been there a long time (not dropped recently).”

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

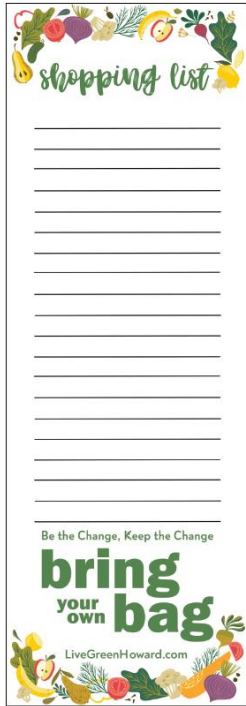
In FY24, the Howard County Sierra Club Zero Waste Team and Less Plastic Please conducted observational surveys of shoppers' bag use in grocery stores a year before (in 2019) and three years after (in 2023) the plastic bag fee was instituted. Their survey and April 2024 report showed that single use plastic 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 FY26, Howard County staff continued to work with Less Plastics Please (LPP) and the Sierra Club. These residents 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. 500 more notepads were printed in July 2026 and will be distributed to the community to further promote reducing single-use plastic bags.



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 FY26, OCS provided reusable bags to eight community partners for use in food pantries and hunger relief operations.

Since the beginning of the program, Howard County has provided 34,986 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
FY26	9,450
Total	34,986

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 FY2026, 9,450 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
- 750 bags to Roving Radish
- 2,400 bags to Oakland Mills Interfaith Green Team
- 800 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 can be found on [the Live Green Howard Flickr website](#).

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, 2024, and 2025 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 five years of PREP grants dispersed \$1,901,067 funding for 62 projects. PREP grant funding peaked in FY25 but has been declining since its peak in FY25 to reflect decreasing amounts in the Disposable Plastics Reduction Fund.

Each year’s PREP grant amounts are as follows:

Year	Number of Projects	Amount Funded
FY 2022	11	\$243,165
FY 2023	11	\$364,357
FY 2024	10	\$349,312
FY 2025	16	\$519,509

FY 2026	14	\$424,724
---------	----	-----------

As of July 2026, 15 organizations have applied for the 2026 PREP grants (FY27 funding). The 2026 PREP grant applications are being processed and will be underway by fall 2026. The estimated total amount to be awarded in FY27 is approximately \$386,000 of the \$539,038.56 requested by the applicants. The 2026 (FY27) round of grants will bring the cumulative total PREP grant expenditure to roughly \$2.3 million. This expenditure has made a significant impact in Howard County and to support our local non-profit organizations.

The following local non-profit organizations have received PREP grants (bold text represents new grantees in FY26):

- **Civic Works**
- 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
- **Indian Cultural Association of Howard County**
- Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake
- Murray Hill HOA
- Oakland Mills Interfaith Center
- **Owen Brown Interfaith Center**
- Patapsco Heritage Greenway
- Residences at Vantage Point
- Resurrection St. Paul School
- Savage Community Association
- **Temple Isaiah**
- Therapeutic and Recreational Riding Center
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
- Upcycled
- Volunteers

PREP Grant 2025 Community Impacts (FY26)

In FY26, \$424,724 funded 14 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, water quality monitoring, education and outreach activities, connecting the public with energy efficiency and solar installation resources, electric vehicle infrastructure, 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 Targeted Environmental Education & Engagement

Nearly half of the grantees are addressing litter and/or pursuing waste reduction practices in Howard County. PREP projects fulfill a need for climate and environmental education at all ages and stages in the community. 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. Youth environmental education and/or workforce development is a core component of more than a third of FY 26's PREP projects. 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, recovering extra food and distributing it to those in need, to administering free after school educational programs for students at Title 1 schools, PREP grants address the goals of Climate Forward while meeting additional 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.

FY26 PREP Grant Project Summaries

Civic Works

This grant helps Howard County residents to reduce their energy costs and make informed decisions about fossil fuel reduction and electrification to improve home health and comfort. Civic Works staff attend public events to connect all residents with energy efficiency programs and connecting them with any incentive programs they may qualify for, including energy assistance, electrification upgrades, and critical home repair resources.

Howard Ecoworks

This grant continues the EcoAmbassador program. High school student EcoAmbassadors attend a summer program to learn about local environmental issues and develop professional and communication skills. They then work together to design and implement action projects which are also funded through the grant. Previous student projects have included rain barrel refurbishment for community giveaways, outreach campaigns to encourage composting, invasive management and native gardens.

Indian Cultural Association of Howard County

Project: Food Recovery Hub: Too Good to Waste Neighborhood Markets

This grant supports recovering 30,000 pounds of surplus food that would go to waste and providing it to HoCo residents by hosting 30 weekly pop-up markets in food-insecure communities. This will reduce food waste while addressing food insecurity. ICAHC is also planning community events to promote environmentally friendly plant-rich diets and providing education materials about the benefits of reusable bag use for plastic reduction.

Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake

This grant engages Howard County congregations in watershed and waste reduction action. IPC offers one-one-one coaching sessions to Howard County congregations to provide educational resources and tools to primarily address waste reduction and stormwater mitigation. IPC also hosts “learning lab” educational events and is convening four Howard County “hub gatherings” to provide congregations with tools and connections to spur environmental action.

Interfaith Power and Light

This grant provides Howard County’s faith communities with education and coaching in energy conservation, electrification, and clean energy adoption to effectively reduce and avoid greenhouse gas emissions. Utilizing established and new relationships with Howard County congregations, IPL supports energy upgrades and solar projects and provides energy and climate education to congregation members.

Friends of Patapsco Valley State Park

This grant provides hands-on outreach and education opportunities within the state park and through after-school BioBlitz programs at 13 elementary schools within the Howard County Public School System. In-park activities focus on litter reduction and breaking down language barriers in environmental education. The BioBlitz program provides students with a basic scientific introduction to the concept of biodiversity.

Howard County Conservancy

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

Climate kNOWledge provides HCPSS sixth graders with hands-on climate science education and a field experience for 10 middle schools. A program for ninth grade Earth Science students, Climate Sustainability Through Empowered and Proactive Solutions (Climate STEPS) is expanding to eight HCPSS high schools to support climate science education and student action projects. The PREP grant also supports the Watershed Report Card – now in its twelfth year – and the continued expansion of the Youth Climate Institute extracurricular program for up to 150 students within 10 Howard County-based chapters.

Oakland Mills Interfaith

Oakland Mills Interfaith (OMI) is a five-congregation interdenominational house of worship in Columbia. This grant provides education and engagement for congregants and community members in areas including composting, recycling, plastic reduction, environmental stewardship, and planting native plants. The grant supports composting activities and education, distribution of reusable shopping bags, litter and stream cleanups, an environmental fair, and continued teaching of environmentally conscious practices.

Owen Brown Interfaith Center

This grant Owen Brown Interfaith Center (OBIC) is a nonprofit community center in Columbia serving as the home of six diverse religious congregations and a childcare center. OBIC will increase publicly available electric vehicle charging in the Owen Brown community by installing two dual-port EV chargers in its parking lot and providing education about the project to the congregations.

Patapsco Heritage Greenway

This grant supports monitoring water quality twice monthly at 13 sites in the non-tidal Patapsco River watershed area from Woodbine to Elkridge. The project also includes monthly documentation of litter at monitoring sites to track plastic debris and bags. Data collected is compiled in an annual Non-Tidal Patapsco River Report Card and is the basis for ongoing outreach events that provide education surrounding water quality and what can be done to improve it.

Residences at Vantage Point

Residences at Vantage Point (RVP), a nonprofit retirement community for adults ages 60 and older in Columbia, returns as a PREP grantee following a successful plastics-reduction project in 2024. For the 2025 grant term, the community is adding two EV chargers to the community's parking garage for use by RVP's planned electric transit vehicle and residents, employees, and guests.

Community Ecology Institute

This grant supports experiential education on how people can reimagine their suburban landscapes and reduce waste from home landscaping and gardening practices. This includes offering workshops on strategies for reducing food waste as well as organic and plastic waste.

Temple Isaiah

This congregation is reducing plastic and food waste by implementing a composting program. Training is being provided to the general membership and auxiliary groups on proper waste sorting and disposal, as well as the benefits of composting. In addition to the composting program, Temple Isaiah will also participate in Howard County's "20 Minute Cleanup" initiative by hosting a congregation-wide litter cleanup.

Upcycled

This grant supports "upcycling" higher number plastics PP (#5) and HDPE (#2) into lumber to make a variety of structures including benches, tables, sheds and flower beds for donation back to the community. Upcycled is designing and installing educational plaques on previously donated structures

and documenting the Waste to Wonder project on its website and social media. The project will conclude with a community trail cleanup and an outreach event to provide education about the relationship between plastic waste, stormwater systems, and the watersheds.

Other Environmental Initiatives

FY26 Other Contractual Services (\$57,048) and Supplies and Materials (\$19,327.39) funds supported OCS-led single-use plastic reduction projects and implementing the Climate Forward Climate Action and Resiliency Plan.

FY26 funds were used toward projects including:

- 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. Due to this relationship with Chesapeake Bay Trust, an additional Maryland Conservation Corps member was also added to the OCS roster for September 2025-June 2026 at no cost to the county besides basics like mileage and office supplies.
- Waste reduction outreach and education including letters to restaurants regarding Howard County's plastic reduction law, grocery list notepads to remind people to bring their reusable bags and boosted social media posts regarding waste reduction.
- Distributing reusable bags to vulnerable communities through local food programs.
- Purchasing metal water bottles for campers in Howard County Recreation & Parks programming as part of Plastic Free July.
- Supporting the Climate Forward plan implementation project to promote programs that convert homes with oil heat to electric, Howard County's Climate Fall Forum, Drive Electric Week, and Howard County's Clean Miles Club.

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 that annually garners hundreds of participants working in groups or individually to remove substantial amounts of litter from the environment. FY2026's initiative removed more than a thousand

pounds of trash through the efforts of volunteers who cumulatively spent more than 360 hours picking up litter.

- Leads outreach to community groups to amplify messaging.
- Coordinates and attends public events, including tabling.
- Supports the Environmental Sustainability Board.

Climate Action Coordinator

- Leads the Plastic Reduction Law outreach and implementation. In FY26, the Climate Action Coordinator sent letters to all affected businesses about the law with educational flyers to raise awareness.
- Leads efforts to improve procurement policies to reduce waste through County government policies and contract language
- Primary staff person dedicated to overall implementation of the 2023 Climate Action Plan.
- Primary staff person coordinating the Climate Subcabinet and the Climate Forward Annual Report.
- Leads the Climate Subcabinet Waste Workgroup and co-leads the Climate Subcabinet Transportation Workgroup.
- Leads efforts to improve procurement policies to reduce waste through County government policies and contract language
- Pursues and implements grant projects, including the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) climate literacy training initiative (\$160,000), three street tree grants from the Chesapeake Bay Trust (CBT) (\$277,777), and multiple projects from the Clean Energy and Community Development (CECD) grant from the Maryland Energy Administration (MEA) (\$210,000).
- Coordinates the submission of IRS Elective Pay refunds (\$307,035).

Conclusions

- Complaints about the bag fee program have been minimal in FY26.
- 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.).

- Continue to coordinate with local environmental groups to increase their promotion of and participation in litter cleanups such as the 20-Minute Cleanup and stream cleanups and to promote reducing the use of disposable plastic bags and other single-use plastics.