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March of the Nickels

Ebbin proposes legislation, again, to stem use of disposable bags.

BY MICHAEL LEE POPE
GAZETTE PACKET

Forgot to take your recyclable bag to Safeway? Didn't bring that cloth sack to CVS? Thought about walking out of the liquor store with your bourbon in a plain paper sack?

Think again, says Del Adam Ebbin (D-49).

When the General Assembly convened earlier this week, Ebbin introduced a bill that would slap

a five-cent fee on every disposable bag used at supermarkets, drug stores and state-owned liquor outlets. Most of the money will go to the Water Quality Im-

provement Fund. The effort will be joined across the frigid Potomac River in the Democratic-controlled Maryland House of Delegates, where Del. Alfred Carr (D-18) has prepared a mirror image of Ebbin's bill.

"This will reduce air pollution and help water quality," said Ebbin, the four-term legislator. "Consumers will have a choice — bring a bag or pay the fee."

Ebbin says he's not expecting the kind of chilly reception he received last year, when his anti-bag bill was killed in the House Finance Committee. Unlike last year's effort, Ebbin explained earlier this week, this year's bill includes incentives for merchants to participate. For each nickel charged at the register, the merchant will receive one penny. The other five

cents will go to a fund controlled by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality that assists local governments to reduce nutrient loads to the Chesapeake Bay.

But industry groups say they're not ready to jump at the money just yet.

"The problem with adding a new tax is that it will be the retailers' responsibility for collecting and remitting the money," said Laurie Aldrich, president of the Virginia Retail Merchants Association.

"One penny per bag is not going to be enough to cover the costs of changing their systems."

THE PUSH to bag the disposable bag has been building for years, with pro-

gressive environmental groups encouraging similar efforts throughout the country. Ebbin's legislation last year was originally inspired by Alexandria City Councilman Tim Lovain, and the measure had the support of Arlingtonians for a Clean Environment. And groups such as California's Earth Resource Foundation have been pressing for action on the issue for years.

"They are bad for the environment, and that's just all there is to it," said state Sen. Patsy Ticer (D-30), who is the chairwoman of the Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources Committee. "Ireland banned them long ago, and I'd certainly like to see us minimize their use as much as we can."

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NEWS

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL LEE POPE/THE CONNECTION

Under a legislative proposal suggested by Del. Adam Ebbin (D-49), customers at supermarkets would be charged a nickel for each disposable bag they use while grocery shopping.

March of the Nickels

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Recent months have seen success for bag-taxing initiatives. The Washington, D.C. City Council approved a five-cent tax last summer, and Toronto also recently slapped a new five-cent tax on disposable bags. So the twin efforts in Maryland and Virginia have been designed to take advantage of the recent

interest in acting to reduce the prevalence of disposable bags at the checkout line.

"I think we have the momentum," said Carr, whose district includes Chevy Chase. "I know the retailer associations will oppose regulation, but we have to consider the cost that not doing this will take on our environment and our own health."