

# 10 arguments from bag tax opponents

By Jenny Rogers

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(Photo: Associated Press)

## **Correction:**

The original version of this story incorrectly stated that the ACC spent \$500,000 fighting the bag tax in Seattle. More updated filing reports with the Seattle Ethics and Elections Committee reveal that the ACC's expenditures totaled \$1.38 million. Hat tip to Emily Utter for pointing out the mistake.

Bag tax talk is everywhere. [Reports](#) are in declaring D.C.'s plastic bag tax a success; two pieces of legislation will soon be on the table in [Virginia](#) to tax plastic and paper bags; and [Maryland](#) is considering proposals of its own. But not everyone is happy. The List spoke with folks from two major opponents: the American Chemistry Council (ACC), a group that represents "the companies that make the products that make modern life possible," and the Virginia Retail Merchants Association (VRMA). They offered plenty of ammunition against bag taxes, from the taste of Seattle voters to ways people can reuse plastic bags (kitty litter box!).

## **1. Taxes aren't the right approach**

Laurie Aldrich, president of the VRMA, says that the tax deters people from buying more even if they bring reusable bags, arguing that if you fill your reusable bag, you'll stop shopping. "You're going to penalize the person who decides to shop more?" she asks. "In this economy?"

## **2. Recycling bags is an important industry in Virginia**

Keith Christman of the ACC says 832 million pounds of plastic bags and wrap were recycled in the U.S. last year, and businesses have sprung up around it. "The bags can be recycled into totes at the grocery store, into new plastic bags, new wraps," he says. He points to Trex, a Virginia company that manufactures desks from plastic bags. "If some of these taxes went through, you'd lose the ability to recycle those materials," he says.

## **3. People reuse plastic bags**

Aldrich ticks off a number of uses for the plastic bag. "They use them to carry their lunches into work. They use them for their kitty litter boxes," she says. "They're being used and recycled. What is so awful about the plastic bag?"

## **4. If you tax plastic, you'll encourage paper. And paper is no good**

Christman points out that paper bags are expensive and environmentally damaging to produce. Aldrich makes the same point and sums it up another way: "Paper bags are just as evil as plastic."

## **5. D.C.'s numbers are off**

As for the District's reported [reduction in bag use](#) this year (from 270 million to 55 million), Christman isn't impressed. "Any such data like that is purely anecdotal," he says. He adds that a conclusion about the policy's success "assumes the policy's fully implemented, and they're not enforcing it." The List contacted the office of Tommy Wells, the D.C. councilmember who sponsored the bag tax bill, and spoke to chief of staff Charles Allen about Christman's assertions. Allen says the folks in charge of assessment, in the office of tax and revenue, "hate anecdotes." "They're a fairly data-driven group," he says. The office collected figures from businesses, which were responsible for reporting their bag usage on the same form they normally report sales. "It's not like someone's standing there ticking off every single bag," Allen says, "but we believe most business owners are honest." As for policy enforcement, Allen acknowledges that initially the Dept. of the Environment "didn't want to crack down right away" on people so they could get used to the policy, but has "stepped up enforcement."

## **6. Taxes penalize people unfairly**

"People forget to bring in bags all the time," says Aldrich. "I'm one of them." She adds that there are people who do one big grocery trip early in the month, particularly people who might have just received an assistance check. "That [takes] a lot of reusable bags," she says, "and that's an awful lot of tax on someone who might not have the means."

## **7. If Seattle didn't like it, Virginians won't**

"I think it's highly unlikely," Christman says. "I mean, Seattle is one of the greenest areas of the country, and they overwhelmingly rejected the bag tax." The ACC spent ~~\$500,000~~ \$1.38 million in 2009 to fight the city's referendum on plastic and paper bag taxes.

## **8. Customers take anger out on retailers, not legislators**

Aldrich says she has heard from unnamed retailers in D.C. that customers are dissatisfied. "They've had all kinds of problems," she says. "Particularly when they got started. There was all kinds of negative feedback." When customers are angry, "who gets blamed?" she asks. "It's going to be that retailer, not some legislative body."

## **9. Retailers hate it**

"All of our grocers have very serious concerns," says Aldrich, "as do the convenience stores, as do the retail stores." She says the association has "heard from a multitude of retailers" who are "already reacting," but declines to name any specifically. "I usually don't give out their names," she demurs. The List contacted several grocers and convenience store chains and heard from 7-Eleven ("I think our position on this one is evolving," a spokesperson said, but didn't comment further) and Harris Teeter (who "strongly encourages its customers to use reusable bags and offers its green reusable bag for \$0.99... We also believe in giving our shoppers a choice and offer our customers the option of both paper and plastic bags").

## **10. The ACC will work with legislators on this issue**

"Whenever discussions come up about plastic bags around the country, we do work with legislators," says Christman. "It's talking to people, educating them, working with them face to face." He offered no specific plans for work with the Virginia State Delegation.