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COMMITTEE: Economic Matters

TESTIMONY ON: HB0135 – Environment - Single–Use Plastics - Restrictions

POSITION: FAVORABLE

HEARING DATE: February 2, 2022

BILL CONTACT: Delegate Sara Love

DoTheMostGood (DTMG) is a progressive grass-roots organization with more than 3000 members who live in all districts of Montgomery County as well as several neighboring jurisdictions. DTMG supports legislation and activities that keep our communities healthy and safe in a clean environment. DTMG strongly supports HB0135 because it will reduce plastic pollution in our environment.

Plastic straws, stirrers, lids, utensils, and condiment packets are offered freely with soft drink and food purchases at virtually all types of restaurants and dining facilities. The easy availability of these items lets people dispose of them knowing that another one is free and within arm’s reach. For example, it’s been estimated that more than 500 million single-use plastic straws are thrown away every day in the US, and that Americans use an average of 1.6 straws per person per day -- that adds up to 175 billion plastic straws per year. That’s enough to fill 46,400 school buses, wrap around the earth 2.5 times, or fill Yankee Stadium more than 9 times every year!

Single-use plastic items are bad for the environment. Most plastic is manufactured from oil, which emits toxic pollutants into the environment. Incinerating discarded plastic releases toxic dioxins into the air, which we end up eating when they settle onto our crops and which bioaccumulate in food animals. We have all seen plastic waste littering beaches, sidewalks, and parks, and floating in the water. For example, plastic straws are in the top 10 litter items found on beaches during International Coastal Cleanup Days and the 6th most common trash item found during ocean cleanups. Plastic is not biodegradable and can’t be naturally broken down in the environment; it photodegrades into smaller and smaller microplastic pieces, which get ingested by marine and land animals and make their way into our food chain. Plastic that gets into the ocean can be mistaken for food by marine animals. When animals ingest plastic, it clogs up their digestive systems, which can choke or kill animals like birds or sea turtles. Microplastics in water also end up in our water supply.

Although recycling is an effective way of dealing with the environmental pollution caused by many other plastic items, recycling facilities do not accept items like straws, stirrers, lids, utensils, and condiment packets because they are too small and light-weight and jam the sorting machinery. These items end up in landfills or incinerators where they degrade and pollute the ground, the water, and the air we all breathe.

The most effective way to eliminate these single use plastic items is not to use them in the first place. This is the goal of HB0135, which will ban distribution of single-use plastic straws, stirrers, lids, utensils, and condiment packets in food service businesses unless customers specifically request them and to accommodate the physical or medical needs of an individual customer.

Several localities in Maryland already ban plastic straws and stirrers. Garrett Park was the first town in Maryland to ban plastic straws, and Rockville banned most plastic straws in 2019. Prince George's and Charles Counties also ban plastic straws. The District of Columbia banned plastic straws in 2019. Other jurisdictions that have banned or have pending legislation to ban plastic straws and stirrers include Hawaii and California, New York City, Seattle and Edmonds in Washington State, Miami Beach and Fort Myers in Florida, Milwaukee Wisconsin, Somerville Massachusetts, and Monmouth Beach New Jersey. Several types of compostable, environmentally friendly alternatives to plastic drinking straws are available to replace plastic straws, including paper straws, bamboo straws, pasta straws and even straws made of straw.

Even food service businesses know that reducing or eliminating use of plastic straws and stirrers is what they need to do for a healthy environment. For example, Starbucks already got rid of its plastic straws, and McDonalds has phased out plastic straws in their UK restaurants, replacing them with paper straws. The Colorado Restaurant Association implemented an "offer first" policy, and the National Restaurant Association recognizes an "offer first" policy as an industry best practice. Xanterra Parks and Resorts launched a "Choose to be Straw Free" program at its facilities in at least ten National Parks across the US. Studies have shown that 50 to 80% of customers don't really need a straw and choose not to take a straw even when they are offered.

If food service businesses across Maryland replace single-use plastic items with reusable or compostable items, a big part of the stream of plastic pollution that cannot be recycled will be eliminated. HB0135 will thereby reduce plastic pollution, help keep our soil, water and air clean, and help Marylanders change our habits in order to create a more sustainable environment.

Therefore, DoTheMostGood strongly recommends a **FAVORABLE** report on HB0135.

Respectfully submitted,

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