

**To:** Tracy Bowen, Executive Director  
Alice Ferguson Foundation

**From:** Steve Raabe, OpinionWorks

**Date:** February 15, 2011

**Subject:** Public Perceptions and Willingness to Address Litter  
in the District of Columbia

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This memorandum summarizes the public opinion research we conducted in the District of Columbia for the Alice Ferguson Foundation (AFF) in 2010. This work, which was underwritten by the District Department of the Environment (DDOE), consisted of:

1. A citywide telephone survey of residents conducted in July.
2. A survey of businesses that are likely to be implementing the District's new 5-cent bag fee, conducted in the Fall and Winter.
3. Three focus groups, two conducted in April and one in November, primarily to support the development of public outreach for AFF's Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative.

## **How This Research Was Conducted**

### **Survey of Residents**

OpinionWorks conducted a citywide survey of 600 randomly-selected District of Columbia residents July 21-28, 2010. The survey examined perceptions of the Potomac River and other local waters, and experience with and attitudes about litter.

The Residents Survey numbers have a sampling error no greater than  $\pm 4.0\%$  at the 95% confidence level. That means that if every adult resident of the District had been interviewed, the actual results would differ by no more than that amount at least 95% of the time.

Interviewees were drawn randomly from a database of District residents provided by a commercial vendor. We added cell phone numbers to the sample to reach residents without landlines, as well. Weights were applied to bring the survey sample into compliance with demographics of the District, according to the latest estimates available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

### **Survey of Businesses**

AFF and DDOE created a list of businesses to interview in sectors that are likely to be implementing the District's new 5-cent bag fee, and/or may be inadvertently contributing to litter through their operations. These include liquor stores, convenience stores, coffee shops, grocery stores, restaurants and carryouts, hotels, large retail stores, and institutions.

A letter from AFF was sent to the owner or manager of each of these businesses, and we followed with a telephone call seeking an interview. A total of 51 businesses were interviewed by telephone or on foot between September 2010 and January 2011.

The survey addressed businesses' experience implementing the bag fee, their own dealings with litter and trash, attitudes about several public policy proposals, and willingness to be engaged in the Trash Free Initiative.

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group is a roundtable discussion of up to 12 people, facilitated by our professional moderator, to allow for an in-depth discussion of attitudes and perceptions. The goal is not to accurately represent the opinions of people all across the City, as is the goal of a telephone survey. Rather, the goal is to explore deep-seated feelings, to allow respondents to speak at length, and to understand the "why" behind their impressions.

A focus group is an excellent way to seek reactions to advertising concepts and messages, as a step towards refining those before money is invested communicating broadly with the public. For this project, that was exactly the purpose of the D.C. focus groups, to help design public outreach messaging for AFF's anti-litter campaign to reach D.C. residents.

We recruited residents to participate in these focus groups who admitted to littering a range of commodities from cigarette butts to wrappers, bottles, cans, cups, and even boxes or bags of trash. They had to admit recent littering in at least two of these categories to be admitted to the focus groups. Respondents were recruited through posters, word of mouth, and through an online ad.

Two focus groups were held on April 20, 2010 in a church in the Deanwood neighborhood of Northeast D.C. This neighborhood was chosen because you had designated the Nash Run sub-watershed, which includes Deanwood, as a focus area for public outreach. On November 29, we held a third focus group at the Frank Reeves Municipal Center at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, N.W., drawing participants from across the City.

Following is a summary of our research findings.

### **Current Perceptions of Residents: How Clean are Neighborhoods and the Waters?**

As a starting point, we asked residents for their perceptions of how "clean and free of trash" their own neighborhood was, and followed that with an assessment of the two major rivers and Rock Creek. We asked them to offer those assessments on the classic A through F scale that is used in school. These grades are summarized in the table on the next page.

Sixty percent (60%) of residents graded their own neighborhood an A or B, while 40% offered a grade of C or lower. Across the city, the average grade for neighborhoods is B-Minus, or 2.63 on the traditional 4-point scale. There are large variations in the neighborhood grades based on where one lives (Wards 3 and 4 giving themselves the highest grades and Wards 5 through 8 the lowest).

For the rivers:

- The Potomac earns a grade of C-Minus (1.86 average), with 24% offering the Potomac an A or B, and 62% grading it C or lower.
- The Anacostia earns a grade of D-Plus (1.23 average), with 11% giving it an A or B, and 74% grading it C or lower. One-quarter of District residents (26%) give the Anacostia a failing grade.
- The Rock Creek is somewhat better regarded but still lacks public confidence, falling mid-way between B and C (2.51 average).

**Grading Neighborhoods and the Local Waters**  
*Survey of Residents*

	A (4)	B (3)	C (2)	D (1)	Fail (0)	Not sure	Average	Grade
Your Neighborhood	21%	39%	28%	6%	6%	1%	2.63	B –
Potomac River	2%	22%	35%	15%	12%	13%	1.86	C –
Anacostia River	1%	10%	23%	25%	26%	15%	1.23	D +
Rock Creek	13%	33%	21%	9%	5%	20%	2.51	B – / C +

*“Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, or Fail. If I were to ask you to grade how clean and free of trash the streets, sidewalks, alleys, and parks in your own neighborhood are on an A to F scale where ‘A’ is best and ‘F’ is worst, what grade would you give?”*

*“Please grade how clean and free of trash the following local creeks and rivers are on an A to F scale where ‘A’ is best and ‘F’ is worst.” (Read and randomize.)*

Only 18% of District residents believe the fish that come out of local waters are safe to eat, and only 8% believes local creeks and rivers are clean enough for swimming.

But there is strong public will to do something about that. Roughly two-thirds of residents said it is “very important” that someday local waters will be clean enough for fishing or swimming.

**Importance of Cleaning up Local Waters**  
*Survey of Residents*

	Fish Safe to Eat	Can Safely Swim
Very important	71%	63%
Important	18%	22%
<b>Total Important</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>85%</b>
Only a little important	7%	9%
Not important	3%	6%
Not sure	2%	*%

*“How important is it to you that someday the local waters be clean enough that any fish you catch are safe to eat?”*

*“How important is it to you that someday the local rivers and creeks be clean enough that people can safely swim in them?”*

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## Experience with Littering and Trash

### Residents' Experience with Littering

Littering is a widespread problem in the District. Many people engage in this behavior, and many others observe it and are bothered by it.

- Two-thirds of residents (68%) said they see someone tossing litter on the ground or in the water often or sometimes. One in five residents (21%) said they see it often.
- Seventy percent (70%) of residents said seeing litter on the ground or in the water bothers them "a lot."
- Nearly all residents (94%) believe that littering contributes to "filth and bacteria" and two-thirds of residents (67%) "would worry about that."
- Similarly, 83% think littering plastics could put toxins in the soil and water, and 67% would worry about that.
- While 85% know littering is against the law, only 7% think there is a "good chance" a litterer will get caught.

In terms of their own behavior, a substantial number of residents are willing to admit to littering. Though the social stigma attached to littering may cause some people to under-report their own behavior, we know from several years of interviewing litterers that most people engaging in this behavior are ready to admit it without stigma. For those who are embarrassed, our questionnaire is designed to be confidential and to walk people up the scale from perhaps more benign actions to more significant ones so they feel safe telling us the truth.

The table below summarizes what residents reported to us about their own littering behavior. Between 12% and 40% of residents litter depending on what is included in the definition.

**Self-Reported Littering Behavior by D.C. Residents**

	Yes
Partially-eaten food	20%
Cigarette butt	12%
Chewing gum	14%
Wrapper	9%
Bottle or can	5%
Cup	3%
Box or bag of trash	1%
<b>Litters at least one item on this list</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Litters at least one item, excluding food</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Litters at least one, excluding food, chewing gum, cigarette butts</b>	<b>12%</b>

*"Probably everybody drops things on the ground or tosses them from a car window from time to time because they are not near a trash can. I'd like to ask you whether you have ever dropped, tossed, or dumped any of these things over the past couple of years or so."*

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### Businesses' Experience with Litter and Trash

Forty percent (40%) of the businesses we interviewed said there is unwanted litter and trash around their property. Of those:

- One-half (52%) said unwanted litter and trash is a problem.
- Nearly one-half (46%) said they or their employees see people tossing litter near their property often or sometimes.
- Nearly six in ten (58%) have to expend personnel and/or financial resources cleaning up trash and litter around their property.

Asked what the City should be doing to help businesses deal with the litter problem, most want more street and sidewalk sweeping, some ask for better enforcement of anti-littering laws, and several mention the new bag fee specifically as a step in the right direction.

While one-third of the businesses we interviewed produce food waste, only 4% of them said they are composting. Only 7% felt they had access to composting. Three-quarters (77%) of the businesses said they are recycling, however.

**Type of Waste Produced by Businesses**

Cardboard	65%
Food waste	35%
Bottles/Cans	32%
Paper	32%
Plastic	30%
Bags	5%
Other	8%

"What type of waste does your {business/organization} produce?"

When AFF's public outreach initiative was briefly described to the business owners and managers, almost half (45%) could see their own business getting involved in some way. Another one-quarter said it was a corporate, not their own decision – meaning the business might get involved pending corporate approval. Specifically:

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the businesses we interviewed said they would be willing to educate customers by posting flyers, posters, or decals.
- A majority (55%) would encourage employees to participate in campaign events and clean-ups.
- Four in ten (41%) would be willing to give input on public policy ideas.
- And a healthy one-quarter (24%) of the businesses would be willing to "sponsor the campaign monetarily to help give it more reach."

### **5-Cent Bag Fee**

We know from the focus groups conducted among District residents in April that knowledge of the new 5-cent bag fee is close to universal. Anecdotally, we also learned in the focus groups that there is very good knowledge that the fee is dedicated to Anacostia River clean-up.

On the Residents Survey, we measured the impact of the fee on bag usage. An astounding 75% of District residents answered that they have reduced their plastic bag usage since the fee was introduced in January. Only 21% said they have not reduced their plastic bag usage, and the rest said they never use bags or were not sure. As a public policy measure intended to impact individual behavior, the bag fee has been an unqualified success.

On the Business Survey, estimates of the reduction in bag usage by their own customers ranged from just a few percentage points to 80% lower – with a majority of the businesses who offered an estimate saying their consumption of bags is at least 50% lower.

Only 12% said the bag fee has affected their business negatively, while 20% said it has affected them positively. Most owners and managers (58%) said the bag fee has not affected their business at all. When asked specifically what positives and negatives they see from the law, owners and managers mentioned a reduction in litter and a benefit to their bottom line with fewer bags purchased; meanwhile, very few specific negatives were mentioned. Businesses said their customers have adjusted to the law, and there appears to be very little complaining about it by customers.

When asked what the City can do to better help them implement the law, the greatest response by businesses is more publicity to support their efforts to explain the fee to customers.

### **Conclusions**

Littering is a widespread problem in the District, with as many as four in ten residents actively littering themselves depending on the definition of litter one uses.

Unwanted litter and trash appears to be a problem for businesses, and many of them have to commit resources to cleaning up. This translates into a healthy willingness on the part of half the businesses we interviewed to become engaged in the Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative. Access to composting appears to be an initiative that would benefit many businesses, as well.

The 5-cent bag fee has changed people's behavior. Three-quarters of residents are using fewer bags. Businesses are not very bothered by the new law, and neither are their customers, they say. Instead, businesses are using many fewer bags and like the impact of that on their bottom line.

Overall, this research provides very good insight into a number of ways to impact the problem of litter and unwanted trash in the District of Columbia.