

Was the Patuxent River Commission shake-up an attempt to silence negative discussion of development projects? | GUEST COMMENTARY

By RICHARD EBERHART HALL, ROBERT M. SUMMERS and ANDREW J. MILLER
FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN |

JAN 23, 2022 AT 5:53 AM



Fred Tutman, Patuxent Riverkeeper (Tim Prudente, Capital Gazette) (By Tim Prudente, Capital Gazette)

We were dismayed to read last month about the recent [dismissal](#) of Fred Tutman, founder of the Patuxent Riverkeeper organization, along with multiple other members of the Patuxent River Commission who are respected scientists, farmers, watershed managers and environmental consultants. According to the Maryland Department of Planning's own [webpage](#), the commission "serves as a steward for the Patuxent River and commits to lead and inspire actions to protect, enhance and restore river species as well as the

natural, cultural, economic, and recreational values in the watershed.” It seems that perhaps Mr. Tutman and his colleagues have been doing their jobs too well.

The Patuxent is the largest watershed located entirely within Maryland’s jurisdiction and has been the proving ground for many of the state’s Chesapeake Bay initiatives. The Patuxent River Commission was created to protect the river from the negative impacts of pollution and excessive development, yet the administration has repeatedly tried to suppress Mr. Tutman and other voices of environmental reason on the commission.

Several years ago, the Department of Planning’s Deputy Counsel issued an advice memorandum to the commissioners stating that they do not have the authority to discuss private land use in the watershed. In fact, since it was created in 1984, the commission has frequently debated the environmental impacts of development. The first Patuxent River Policy Plan, created to guide the Watershed jurisdictions in addressing these issues, was approved by the commission that same year. The Policy Plan has been updated regularly by the commission, most recently in 2015, and has been adopted by all seven watershed counties and the state General Assembly. Fortunately, the Planning Department’s incorrect advice was corrected by the attorney general’s chief counsel.

The recent decision to drop Mr. Tutman and others is being interpreted as a retaliatory measure intended to prevent discussion of the negative impacts of development projects and shield them from public scrutiny. The dismissal is particularly painful as we mourn the recent death of Sen. Bernie Fowler of Calvert County, a legendary fighter for the health of the Patuxent and founder of the annual “wade-in,” attended over the years by governors and elected representatives of both parties. Sen. Fowler-style “wade-ins” are now being

held annually in tributaries all over the bay watershed to call attention to water quality restoration efforts.

With this recent action, the administration is seeking to silence important voices on land use and water resource protection. Maryland has historically been a leader in addressing these issues and taking the steps necessary to restore and protect Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The administration's actions in this case signify a retreat from a strong legacy of Maryland's environmental leadership.

Mr. Tutman, the nation's only African-American Riverkeeper, represents the eighth generation of his family to be born and raised along the Patuxent and has been a prominent voice for protecting the Patuxent River, one of the most environmentally impacted tributaries to Chesapeake Bay. As Mr. Tutman pointed out in a [2019 article](#) about him, "Citizens along the Patuxent were literally suing before the Clean Water Act was enacted. In fact, the origins of the Save the Bay movement are entirely from the impetus or the example set by Patuxent advocates."

Mr. Tutman is known nationally as a leading advocate for environmental protection and environmental justice, ensuring access to nature and engaging people of color in environmental action. This is an issue of critical importance that is being highlighted by the Chesapeake Bay Program. Gov. Larry Hogan has [recently endorsed](#), along with other regional leaders on the Chesapeake Executive Council, a new Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice strategy that highlights environmental justice and inclusion of people of color in decision-making as important guidelines for the bay restoration effort. Dismissing Mr. Tutman from a position of influence on the Patuxent River Commission certainly runs counter to this much-needed enhancement to the bay restoration effort.

In removing Mr. Tutman and the others from the commission, the administration has made a serious error that will damage Maryland's efforts to restore and protect the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay. We urge Gov. Hogan to review and to overrule this decision. It reflects negatively on Maryland's commitment to including a diversity of voices, particularly those of dedicated people like Mr. Tutman who are working to ensure that equity, inclusion and environmental justice are front and center to our efforts for restoring and protecting the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries for all Marylanders.

Richard Eberhart Hall (richard.eberhart.hall@gmail.com) is a former Maryland secretary of planning. Robert M. Summers (robert.summers.phd@gmail.com) is a former Maryland secretary of the Environment. Andrew J. Miller (miller@umbc.edu) is a professor of geography and environmental systems at UMBC and a former chair of the Chesapeake Bay Program Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee.