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**Committee:** Appropriations

**Testimony on:** HB 74 – “Transportation – Maryland Rail Authority – Establishment (Maryland Rail Investment Act of 2023)”

**Position:** Support

**Hearing Date:** January 31, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB 74 which would establish the Maryland Rail Authority (MRA) in the Department of Transportation. The MRA would be responsible for the supervision, financing, construction, operation, maintenance, and repair of rail projects in the state. The projects overseen by the MRA would include: improving the Brunswick, Camden, and Penn Lines of the Maryland Area Rail Commuter (MARC) service; extending MARC service to Newark, DE, Northern Virginia and Western Maryland; replacing the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel; and designing, constructing and operating the Southern Maryland Rapid Transit System and the Baltimore Red Line.

The MRA would be funded by federal grants, revenue from “optimal” tolling at Maryland’s existing tolled highways and bridges, fare revenue, and the sale of revenue bonds. An optimal tolling strategy would involve setting tolls at or near the highest amount a user would be willing to pay, with appropriate discounts offered to commuters and others, and with sufficient funds from tolling reserved to handle road and bridge maintenance needs. Optimal tolling is used in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania, and is consistent with efforts increasingly promoted by transportation planners and environmental organizations nation-wide to reduce vehicle miles traveled on roadways (as people seek to avoid high tolls) and encourage greater use of rail and transit to decrease pollution and traffic congestion.

Transportation is the largest contributor to climate-disrupting greenhouse gases in Maryland and our country, and is a major source of toxic emissions that are hazardous to human health. Most of that pollution comes from the tailpipes of gas and diesel-fueled cars and trucks on the road today. Reliable rail and transit service is a far more cost-effective and environmentally friendly way for people to travel than driving cars, and better serves lower-income individuals and many young people today who don’t own a car and need reliable transportation to access jobs, housing, medical services, shopping, recreation, and entertainment. Establishing the MRA would greatly increase the amount of rail service in our state.

There are two additional topics worth mentioning. We like that the bill calls for identifying the type and amount of air pollution near toll facilities, and mapping the prevalence of health issues related to the presence of the pollutants. Also, we believe the MRA should have as one of its mandates the protection of the rights of all rail, construction and other workers involved in projects overseen by the rail authority.

In summary, the MRA would fund, construct and operate much-needed rail and transit projects statewide. This would get more cars off the road, be better for public health and the environment, and would lead to more prosperous and sustainable growth in our region. We urge a favorable report on this bill.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.