



February 23, 2023

SUPPORT SB613- Electricity - Community Solar Energy Generating Systems Program

Chairman Feldman and Members of the Committee:

Maryland League of Conservation Voters and the organizations cosigned below are in strong support of SB613, a bill to make Maryland's Community Solar Program permanent, and we are thankful to Senator Brooks for his leadership on this issue.

When the General Assembly, through the work of this committee, first passed HB1087 in 2015, Maryland became a pathbreaker in Community Solar - a program that uses a subscriber model that allows homeowners, renters, and businesses without the ability to install their own solar panels to reap the benefits of solar ownership. What was an innovative model six years ago is now widely used nationwide. Nearly half of the states, as well as the District of Columbia, have permanent laws on the books that support community solar. Maryland, the trailblazer, risks falling behind if the program is permitted to sunset at the end of 2024. SB613 ensures that Maryland remains a leader, both through affirming community solar as an essential part of our clean energy economy, and enshrining key provisions that ensure that a permanent program is accessible to all Marylanders. It is critical that this bill pass - and that it pass this year.

Fundamental to the program principles is centering access for low and moderate income Marylanders who lack the financial resources, or the home ownership, to install their own residential rooftop solar panels. SB613 reinforces these principles by mandating that developers dedicate at least 40% of their project capacity to serve low-and-moderate income (LMI) families, and those in overburdened and underserved communities. This aligns the program with the principles of the federal Justice 40 directive, and ensures that electricity cost-savings reach those that need it the most.

Additionally, SB613 makes a critical fix to the existing program by allowing for "utility consolidated billing (UCB)." Currently, subscribers to community solar projects receive two bills - one from the solar project for the electrons created, which is automatically drawn from a bank account or credit card - and the other from the utility company for the electrons delivered. This inefficient and complicated system effectively blocks low-income households that receive Energy Assistance from participating in a program that would lower their electricity costs by 10% or more. UCB would provide the option for developers to have their costs included on the utility bill, making it simpler for the consumer - and expanding access to community solar to the Marylanders who need it the most. Other third party retail energy suppliers already benefit from this option.

Beyond the pocket-book benefits allowed by community solar, this program will continue to play a vital role in ensuring that Maryland reaches the renewable energy goals set forth by the Clean Energy Jobs Act in 2019 (passed by this committee) as well as the still more ambitious commitments set by Governor Moore for 100% clean energy by 2035. This goal is achievable, but only with bold and aggressive support of clean energy development, especially solar, even as we look to protect our cherished forests and the farmlands we rely on for our agricultural economy.

Through clarified co-location requirements, SB613 incentivizes increased production of community solar projects on preferred sites: rooftops, industrial zones, brownfields, parking lots, transportation rights-of-way and airports, as well as farmland where agrivoltaics are used. These projects are more expensive to build, and so are made more possible through the economies of scale offered by the larger co-located projects. SB613 also incorporates information on the forest and tree canopy impacted into the application process (modeling New Jersey's laws to this effect), and makes this information publicly available.

For its economic benefits, as well as its climate benefits, SB613 is a priority of Maryland's environmental community, including the Sierra Club and the Maryland Legislative Coalition Climate Justice Wing, and is a priority recommendation for the Maryland Commission on Climate Change. It is a top priority of Maryland League of Conservation Voters.

We strongly urge a favorable report.

Maryland League of Conservation Voters

Audubon Mid-Atlantic
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Environmental Justice Ministry
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Chesapeake Earth Holders
Climate Access Fund
EarthJustice
Environment Maryland
Friends of Sligo Creek
Glen Echo Heights Mobilization
HoCo Climate Action
Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake
Maryland Environmental Health Network
Maryland Legislative Coalition
Maryland PIRG
NAACP Maryland State Conference
The Nature Conservancy - Maryland/DC
National Aquarium