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SLAPP SUIT IMPACT STATEMENT

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As an active community member with PTA and Greater Fallston Association, I was familiar with local government and decisions made by elected representatives that could directly affect me and my community.

Stephanie Flasch and I decided in March 2016, a petition would be the best way to alert neighbors about Harford County's 2016 strategic planning and zoning land use document called Harford NEXT. The process proposed an expansion of public water and sewer system, known as the "Development Envelope". The administration (Harford County Government) asked for input from the community.

After completing the petition, we met with our district's councilman, Mr. Joe Woods and a follow up meeting with County Executive Barry Glassman and Brad Killian, the Director of Planning & Zoning. The printed petition was submitted to our elected officials via the public participation process for Harford NEXT.

The week after that first meeting, a lawsuit was filed the following week specifically against Stephanie and me by a developer whose property would be directly impacted by the public water and sewer expansion, even though we had said nothing about him specifically.

I was shocked, dismayed and completely confused as to how my First Amendment right to free speech could be potentially silenced by another person using what was to me, legal extortion.

My family and friends were stressed and nervous about the bully tactic. We are a middle-class family with kids in school. We simply did not have the same resources as a well-heeled developer with access to high priced lawyers. We incurred legal expenses totaling \$8000+ and started a GOFUNDME page before the American Civil Liberties graciously took our case.

Regrettably, citizens in the community were negatively affected and withdrew from participation. With the support of the ACLU, we provided input at a June 2016 public hearing, with guarded comments.

The developer did not drop the suit until September 2016 and each day that summer brought new anxiety about what would happen next. This frivolous lawsuit was wrong on multiple levels and should never happen again in Maryland.

The proposed anti-SLAPP legislation would both provide some assurance to citizens who speak out, by creating a way to dismiss weak suits at an early stage before the speaker's costs get completely out of hand and to provide lawyers who defend against SLAPP's to get paid on a contingency basis. At the same time, anti-SLAPP laws discourage weak lawsuits directed at suppressing free speech without any real expectation of winning based on merit.