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February 6, 2024

Senator Brian Feldman  
Education, Energy, and the Environment  
2West, Miller Senate Building  
11 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Ref: SB 135: Workgroup to Study Funding for the Westernport Wastewater Treatment Facility - Establishment

Honorable Chairman Feldman,

I am writing this letter of support for Senate Bill 135, sponsored by Senator Ellis entitled, Workgroup to Study Funding for the Westernport Wastewater Treatment Facility – Establishment. With the enactment of this legislation, a workgroup would be created to study and make recommendations for the future operations, maintenance, and improvements for the large industrial wastewater treatment facility located in Westernport, Maryland and currently owned and operated by the Upper Potomac River Commission.

The Upper Potomac River Commission was established in 1935 (Chapter 409, Acts of 1935). It has jurisdiction over the water resources of Allegany County in Garrett County, Maryland. The Upper Potomac River Commission was created to operate the UPRC industrial wastewater treatment facility in Westernport, MD, and to oversee the operation of the Savage River Dam in Garrett County. I am a member of the Commission appointed by the Garrett County Commissioners about 30 years ago.

The industrial wastewater treatment facility was built to treat industrial waste from the West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company in Luke, MD, and the surrounding area. The WWTP had a rated capacity of about 20 million gallons, The UPRC issued bond bill funding to construct the facilities, and payments on the bond bills were guaranteed by the paper mill. The mill utilized about 95% of the capacity of the WWTP. No Federal and State funding was provided to build and improve the facility over the years.

The sewer systems from the towns of Westernport, Luke Maryland, and Piedmont, West Virginia were connected to the facility after it was constructed. The towns were required to make payments for sewer treatment, but essentially the charges were very affordable and Luke, MD was provided sewer service by the paper mill.

Verso/Billerud, the owner of the papermill at the time, shut down the mill in 2019. Without going into great details, without payments coming from the mill, the towns cannot possibly afford to pay for the total operational costs of operating and maintaining the UPRC WWTP in Westernport, MD.

This legislation is very much needed to form a Commission to seek to find a viable solution for the operation of this facility going forward.

I strongly support SB 135. Workgroup to Study Funding for the Westernport Wastewater Treatment Facility – Establishment, and urge your Committee to pass this bill.

Sincerely yours,

Wendell Beitzel, Former Member  
Maryland House of Delegates

Cc. Senator Mike McKay  
Delegate Jim Hinebaugh  
Delegate Jason Buckel  
Garrett County Commissioners  
Scott Shoemaker, UPRC