

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

TO: Marc Korman, Chair, Environment and Transportation Committee, and Committee Members
FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Climate Adaptation Manager; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager
POSITION: Support HB 655 Environment – State Wetlands – Shoreline Stabilization Measures

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 655 offered by Delegate Stein. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

HB 655 prioritizes non-structural or nature-based shoreline stabilization measures by curbing the widespread use of armored shorelines. This bill clarifies existing law as it pertains to waivers for building new armored shorelines and creates a future potential funding source for implementing nature-based solutions to protect our shores. Maryland's meandering coastline touches the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean and spans over 7790 miles. This vibrant coastline is linked to Marylanders' lives and livelihoods. The Maryland coastline is home to 70% of the state's residents, about 4.3 million people based on 2020 census data, who live in 16 coastal counties and Baltimore City. In addition to its ties to a rich cultural history, the Chesapeake Bay and adjoining tidal wetlands' productive estuarine ecosystems are vital habitats for thousands of species of plants and birds combined.

Our state's rich and diverse coastline is under increasing threat from climate change. The 2023 Maryland Sea Level Rise Projections, prepared by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences finds that by 2050, Maryland will experience one to one and a half feet of sea level rise measured from a 2000 baseline, which is twice the amount of sea level rise experienced in the previous century. By 2100, the state is expected to experience three feet of sea level rise. Structured shorelines can offer short term protection from flooding, but these structures are expensive and do not offer sustained and long-term protection. It's important for the state to consider multiple approaches and co-benefits of each approach in designing flood mitigation strategies.

Nature-based solutions offer the best path forward in Maryland as our state prepares to tackle intensifying climate challenges head-on. Nature-based solutions such as vegetated buffers, wetlands, dunes, and reefs offer tremendous benefits that go beyond shoreline protection. Nature-based solutions can not only stabilize shorelines, but they are also cheaper to implement than traditional armored solutions. These natural features preserve diverse coastal ecosystems, improve water quality, provide aesthetic and recreational value, and restore waterfront communities' connection to their coastlines. These positive impacts combined contribute to the coastal communities' overall vibrancy and create more resilient coastlines.

Planning for climate change's various and often uncertain impacts is a highly localized and place-based process that is necessary to identify solutions that can meet each community's the unique needs. We cannot continue to build ever-higher sea walls to combat climate change, and it is important to safeguard the well-being of communities unable to afford armored shorelines' high cost. For communities living at the water's edge, nature-based solutions and addressing environmental justice concerns go hand-in-hand. By removing permitting exceptions for armored shorelines, HB 655 will mitigate the harm these structures can cause adjacent low-lying areas that are unarmored and may face increased flooding due to displaced water from armored shoreline areas.

We commend Delegate Stein for introducing this legislation. HB 655 is a step in the right direction and continues to build upon Maryland's legacy of taking bold and proactive action for creating equitable climate solutions for its residents and natural resources.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 655.