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Budget and Taxation Committee

Subcommittees

Capital Budget

Pensions

Chair, Public Safety,
Transportation, and Environment

Joint Committee on the Chesapeake and
Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area

Chair, Joint Subcommittee on
Program Open Space/Agricultural
Land Preservation

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

April 3, 2024

Testimony in Favor of SB 674
Abandoned or Sunken Vessels and Maritime Heritage Grant Program

Chairman Korman, Vice-Chair Boyce, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

I respectfully request a favorable report of Senate Bill 674 which will improve the State's contact with and response to suspected abandoned and hazardous boats as well as establish the Maritime Heritage Grant Program.

District 30 includes miles of beautiful waterfront. Consequently, our office frequently receives calls from constituents concerned about boats that are visibly sinking, anchored in a hazardous area, or are potentially abandoned. In these events, our office contacts the Natural Resource Police (NRP), who investigate the issue and attempt to contact the owner on record of the vessel. Far too often, NRP are unable to get in contact with the vessel owner, or by the time they do, the boat has sunk.

Current statute requires only that boat owners submit a physical mailing address on their vessel registration. As a result, NRP have only the option of attempting to contact vessel owners in emergency situations through standard mail. The only way in which NRP can determine that the vessel owner is unable to be contacted is by the return of the mailed notice to the sender. This procedure is antiquated and ineffective, resulting in extended timelines for intervention of hazardous and abandoned boats. Our experience in District 30 shows us that when hazardous boats are not addressed in a timely manner, they are more likely to sink, which is exponentially more expensive to address. It costs as much as five times the amount of money to lift a sunken boat than it does to tow it in the first place. Sinking boats also cause significant environmental and navigational threats to our environment and other boaters.

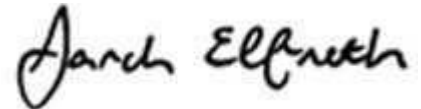
SB 674 will empower the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and NRP to more immediately contact the owners of vessels in the event of suspected abandonment or hazardous conditions of a boat. Boat registration will now require the documentation of a telephone number and email address for all vessel owners, giving NRP more tools to contact vessel owners with immediacy. DNR will also have the ability to require emergency contact information for vessel owners. This bill clarifies that unreturned phone calls and emails as well as emails returned to sender would constitute attempted and unsuccessful contact to vessel owners, allowing NRP to move more quickly in addressing boats abandoned or in dangerous situations.

SB 674 establishes a vessel turn-in program to provide assistance and relief to boat owners who are no longer able to afford docking and care of their vessel. Boat owners experiencing financial hardship may not be able to continue affording the upkeep and storage of their vessels. This often leads to boat abandonment and eventual hazardous conditions. The vessel turn-in program will provide a mechanism for boat owners to turn their vessel in to DNR in order to prevent abandonment. DNR will manage the program and advertise it publicly as an available option for vessel owners in need. Additionally, NRP will provide this as an option when contacting the owners of vessels. DNR reports that this program can and will be done utilizing existing funding and will not require additional revenue.

SB 674 establishes an annual grant program to promote public education on Maryland's unique maritime history. This bill empowers DNR to allocate \$250,000 from the Waterway Improvement Fund (WIF) to the Maritime Heritage Grant Program. Grantees will utilize this funding to establish public programming highlighting and celebrating Maryland's maritime heritage. As a result of the implementation of this annual grant, Marylanders will have brand new opportunities to experience, access, and learn about Maryland's one-of-a-kind maritime history - history that led to and sustains our thriving boating culture and economy.

I urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 674.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Elfreth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senator Sarah Elfreth
District 30