



Committee: Environment and Transportation
Testimony on HB 1279, Better Buildings Act
Organization: Elders Climate Action Maryland
Submitting: Leslie Wharton, Chapter Leader
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: March 6, 2024

Dear Chair and Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing our testimony today in support of HB 1279. Elders Climate Action Maryland is our state chapter of [Elders Climate Action](#), a nationwide movement of elders striving for a future where our children, grandchildren, future generations, and all life can thrive. We urge you to vote favorably on HB 1279.

Climate change is one of the greatest threats to our public health. The health effects include more vector-borne diseases, more heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke, injuries from wildfires and extreme weather events such as hurricanes and floods, and mental health problems. These issues threaten the lives and health of all Maryland residents, particularly children and the elderly.

One thing that is less often recognized is the close tie between air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. 88% of Maryland residents live in areas that do not meet EPA air quality standards. Air pollution is a major contributor to absences from work and school, increased healthcare costs, and premature deaths. This can be seen clearly in the high rates of hospitalization for asthma in Maryland, especially in Baltimore. Research shows that decreases in air pollution lead to significant and rapid decreases in asthma hospitalizations. Improvements in health, especially in children and people living in overburdened communities, will be the first benefit we see from decreasing the use of fossil fuels.

The Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022 set the ambitious carbon pollution reduction goals of any state in the country. We must meet those goals. As the [Maryland Commission on Climate Change](#) said in their 2023 report, "The climate crisis is upon us. Within just five years, global temperatures could breach the critical 1.5°C threshold, triggering catastrophic and irreversible consequences. This long-feared catastrophe is imminent - the time for meaningful climate action is now."

Buildings account for [13% of the state's polluting carbon emissions](#). It is impossible to meet our essential goals if we continue to utilize fossil fuels for space and water heating.

The Better Buildings Act does just what its name implies – it requires most new buildings to be built smart from the start, with better energy conservation and no onsite fossil fuel combustion for space and water heating. It requires electrification, EV-readiness, solar readiness, and high levels of energy efficiency in new buildings over 25,000 square feet.

SB1023 implements a simple vision of how we want our public and private buildings to be in the future – less expensive to operate and much better for the climate crisis we face. It is a common-sense bill that ensures that new construction utilizes highly efficient, cost-effective electric appliances that are better for our health, our wallets, and the climate.

Today's heat pumps are three to four times [more efficient](#) than fossil fuel heating equipment and remain two to three times more efficient even in winter weather. According to a report by the Building Decarbonization Coalition (BDC), the average heat pump sold uses as much as [29% less electricity](#) during periods of peak demand than a central AC unit. The Maryland Energy Administration states, "Heat pumps are an essential tool to lowering monthly energy bills and keeping electricity demand low year-round."

Tax credits and rebates made available by the Inflation Reduction Act have made efficient electric appliances more affordable for Marylanders in every income bracket. Across Maryland, 98% of households using high-efficiency electric appliances instead of fossil fuel heating equipment can save money on their monthly energy bills. The median low-income household in Maryland would [save \\$373 per year](#) by replacing a gas furnace with an all-electric heat pump.

The net effect of passing the Better Buildings Act would be to reduce carbon pollution emissions both directly (through onsite combustion) and indirectly (through electric generation), improve air quality, and substantially lower utility costs for homeowners and renters. To strengthen the bill, we urge the committee to consider the prohibition of any fossil fuel appliances in the home, including gas stoves, which have been shown to have significant [adverse health impacts](#), including a higher risk of asthma in children. As many of our members will attest, cooking on an induction stove gives great results. Induction cooktops are also [increasingly common in commercial kitchens](#), such as at Jose Andres' Minibar, a Michelin two-star restaurant in DC.

As Maryland transitions to a cleaner energy future, buildings using efficient electric heat pumps and heat pump water heaters will be cleaner, greener, and [less costly to build and operate](#) than those using methane gas or oil. All-electric buildings are simpler to construct, and that simplicity leads to cost savings. [Gas piping increases the cost](#) to build a typical single-family home in Maryland by \$2,580.

Mandating that new construction be smart from the start is a common-sense first step to reducing emissions from buildings.

As Jonathan Foley, director of [Project Drawdown](#), said in a [recent interview](#), a one-year delay in the implementation of a climate solution decreases its value by about 7%. The time to act is now. We strongly recommend a FAVORABLE report for HB 1279 in committee.

