



House Bill 717

Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Committee

Date: March 25, 2025

From: Karrington Anderson

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** HB 717 to ensure greater flexibility in the use of Program Open Space (POS) Local allocations. This bill allows flexibility for future allocations for POS funds if the Department of Natural Resources and Department of Planning certify that the acquisition goals have been met. Department-sought amendments clarify the intended beneficial effects on local jurisdictions who have met State-set land preservation goals.

Since its inception in 1969, POS has enabled the State of Maryland and its counties to expand public access to recreational spaces and natural areas, delivering immense health and economic benefits to communities across the state. Over time, counties' ability to reach lofty land acquisition goals has been a variable, but those who have done so now require more resources for park maintenance and facility improvements. The current rigid allocation structure does not adequately address evolving needs, resulting in inefficiencies in fund utilization, especially given recent reductions in state funding due to declining transfer tax revenues.

HB 717 presents a valuable opportunity to modernize POS local allocations by allowing counties to direct resources toward vital park enhancements – including upgrades to playgrounds, recreation centers, and other facilities – while maintaining appropriate oversight through the Department of Natural Resources and acreage-per-capita considerations.

Given the fiscal constraints facing local governments, county Recreation and Parks departments are striving to maximize the effects of limited resources through innovative and efficient solutions. Granting counties increased discretion in the use of POS local funds will allow them to better meet the diverse recreational needs of their residents while ensuring responsible stewardship of public resources.

For these reasons, MACo urges a **FAVORABLE** report on HB 717.