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House Bill 517 – Constitutional Amendment – Environmental Rights

Committee: Environment and Transportation

February 19, 2019

Position: Organizational SUPPORT

Dear Chairman and members of the Committee;

Thank you for the opportunity to address this body. Thanks to Delegate Vaughn Stewart for taking on the mantle of visionary leadership on this timely and important matter.

My name is Tamara Toles O’Laughlin and I am the North America Director of 350.org, a global grassroots organization dedicated to the fast and just transition to 100% renewable energy, ending all fossil fuel projects, and divesting from fossil fuel companies.

The bill before this body aligns with our ongoing support of our local affiliates’ desire for impactful action in the climate decade. Moreover, the through line of equity within this bill as written aligns with our mission and vision for a multiracial and multigenerational movement to address the impacts of climate crisis consistent with science and justice.

As a resident of Maryland, I have an organic interest in legislation aimed at supporting greater health and longevity for the chronically underserved facing increased threats in the climate crisis. Policies that promote environments of clean air and water, strong local economies, and meaningful community engagement in policy-making go a long way to a better Maryland.

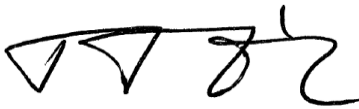
For these reasons, I urge support for House Bill 517, because it takes seriously the need to take intentional steps within the halls of power to improve the health and well-being of communities across the state and the region.

Maryland has a well-earned reputation for leading edge action on matters of environment, clean and renewable energy and comprehensive health protections for its residents. HB517 builds on that legacy and proposes to enshrine protections for breathable air, clean water and access to a healthy environment for all Marylanders in our most highly regarded authority, our state constitution, for generations to come. As the latticework of federal protection is threatened on a daily basis by rollbacks, reversals and other restraints, Maryland may no longer be able to count on preemptive action and must begin to build its own state level defenses to ensure our continued trajectory of growth.

The Amendment places these values into our State’s Declaration of Rights and connects them to the existential threat of our lifetime, a warming planet and related extreme weather events. As climate change alters our relationship to the land, and water we must be nimble in our thinking to safeguard the most vulnerable and bolster our state and local government’s ability to respond to the threat.

This bill promotes the development of an overarching standard that would support our shared interests in greater clean and renewable energy use, produced within our state, and the development of local businesses that support those ends. Similarly, this bill compliments our existing law on standing for environmental action, and fits well with our common law while expanding access to just transition, jobs and the preservation of our shared heritage, historical and legacy sites. Finally, this proposed legislation would support the robust defense of our flood management, stormwater and Maryland Environmental Policy act aims to protect, maintain, and enhancement our environment, by acting as a bright line for action by the Maryland Department of Environment, Department of Natural Resources and Departments of Transportation and Health, among others.

As we have seen in recent years of increasingly extreme heat, and flooding that spurs annual property damage in Annapolis, the Eastern Shore, Western and Southern Maryland, Baltimore City and painfully reoccurring in Historic Ellicott City. We are in a new age. The impacts of climate change are upon us now with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Fourth Annual National Climate Assessment bringing the urgency into sharp relief. With less than ten years to avoid encouraging the worst possible impacts by 2100, we support bold action from our state leadership where it has a distinct advantage over the national dialogue. We are already working towards solutions on the elements of a climate in crisis and this legislation provides an enduring framework for that action. While we acknowledge that historically a fiscal note is likely to struggle to accurately define the impact of this legislation to date, we urge a favorable report from this committee to further the public dialogue and continue our development of forward thinking policy that protects life, liberty and the pursuit of health in our environment and our communities.



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