

The University of Maryland Residence Hall Association
Testimony for HB1295
Appropriations Committee, Tuesday, Mar. 16, 2021
University System of Maryland - Student Fees - Review and Retention
POSITION: FAVORABLE

Thank you to Chair McIntosh and the committee for considering this legislation. My name is Emily Berry and I am the president of the Residence Hall Association (RHA), which represents the voice of all on-campus students at the University of Maryland. After having been deeply involved in the discussion of student fees for over two years in this role, I strongly support HB1295 and its implications for increasing transparency and preventing future negative effects on departments and the student body.

I have held an RHA seat on several fee advisory committees at the University of Maryland. However, I did not become aware of the reversion until October 17th, 4 months after a memorandum was sent to all deans and budget officers informing them 5% of their fund balances would be instead used by the university for projects that were not mentioned or approved in any fee proposals. In the following months, discussions with directors in and outside of the Committee for the Review of Student Fees (CRSF) revealed how much this loss impacted their plans to serve students -- we heard many times that if this budget loss continues then departments will have to take on debt and halt projects crucial to the well-being of the student body.

RHA students are especially involved in the review of the proposed housing, dining, and parking permit fees, and thus know how important transparency and communication -- two priorities that were abandoned during the reversion -- are to ensuring fair costs and success of our departments. We spend weeks diligently reviewing each fee and the projects the funds will be used towards, including crucial residence hall renovations, increased dining accommodations, and increasing fund balances in case of emergency. The reversion meant that instead of what they were approved for, these funds were taken for alternative projects, harming the ability of these departments to serve students. Resident Life and Residential Facilities had to defer the renovations of two halls, having a significant impact on their operations and the strategic housing plan that exists to expand housing opportunities and quality. Dining and Transportation also indicated uncertainty about the negative impact future fund losses could have. As a representative of on-campus students, leaving this issue unresolved greatly concerns me.

On March 3, 2020, the RHA senate body voted unanimously on behalf of the resident student body to condemn the university for its reversion and require a discussion of potential future reversion plans in CRSF to protect the integrity of student fees and their intended use. SB895 achieves this goal, ensuring that departments will not have to halt or cut projects due to unanticipated losses. This is not a debate of which projects are most important, but rather a question of whether university stakeholders deserve to have a voice in the way fees that are approved for certain purposes are ultimately spent. If the University of Maryland is able to continue taking funds for alternative purposes with zero transparency, it will likely have dire consequences on the ability of departments to provide the services that are vital to both on- and off-campus student success and well-being. I strongly urge a favorable vote on HB1295.

Sincerely,
Emily Berry
President, UMD Residence Hall Association