

HB 1099 – Favorable with Amendments
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Testimony for the House Appropriations Committee
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HB1099 – Historic African American Cemetery Preservation Fund and Study

Favorable with Amendments

Dear Chairwoman McIntosh, Vice Chair Chang, and Committee members:

My name is Ilhan Cagri. I am testifying on House Bill 1099, on behalf the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a national public affairs nonprofit organization working to promote and strengthen American pluralism by increasing understanding and improving policies that impact American Muslims, and the Muslim Voices Coalition, a coalition of Maryland Muslims and allies promoting the rights of minorities in our state.

I write to express the views of the members of these organizations who support HB 1099 - **Historic African American Cemetery Preservation Fund and Study** on the condition that the following amendments be incorporated.

It is simply outrageous that even as we recognize the egregious harms, violence, and cruelty that we as a nation have inflicted on the people of African descent in this country, we cannot be moved to properly and unequivocally preserve the cemeteries that hold their ancestors and their history. This hearing is an opportunity to right that wrong. We must preserve and protect the Moses African Cemetery and all historic Black cemeteries to the State. We cannot be a party to destroying the ability for descendant communities to control their history, ancestral remains and bioarchaeological resources. It is a moral and historical imperative to stop siding with developers, their consultants and non-African-Americans. African-American history must be sacrosanct. While it is a start, this Bill does not go far enough. We are asking that you make the following four amendments:

1. The basic human rights of descendent communities to choose how their family and ancestors are remembered and celebrated must be codified in this Bill. This bill *must* recognize and uphold the fact that African-Americans have the right to the remains of their family and ancestors. The fact that we must fight for this points indicates the utter lack of justice in this country and the continued dehumanization of Black bodies globally.
2. This bill must address the fact that because of the theft of Black lands, most descendants no longer own their ancestral burial grounds, **thus, they are not in the position to benefit from HB-1099**. This Bill benefits those who are currently in possession of stolen

Black land and their collaborators, *not* the families of the interred communities. The bill must provide for descendant communities to determine the disposition of their ancestors and their artifacts.

3. The crisis is urgent! Moses Cemetery and similar burial grounds are under threat of complete destruction *right now* and cannot wait for the granting of funds, or the completion of a lengthy study. This Bill must create accountability - civil and criminal penalties - for the destruction of historic Black burial grounds, and of the bioarchaeology that tells the story of the interred. This history is as much an American history as it is a Black history. We all lose when this history is lost.
4. This Bill at present maintains the systemic power imbalance between developers, white preservationist NGO's, big-business cultural resources groups, and the descendent communities. The lack of control over historic Black cemeteries and the lack of funding to preserve them has allowed developers and established, white-led preservation groups to divide descendent communities for profit. Many of the organizations named in this Bill have facilitated and *supported* the desecration of Moses Cemetery. They must be excluded from the Bill, and decision-making powers given to descendent communities.

In addition to the obvious historical justifications for this bill plus the amendments, as Muslims, we are unequivocally against the desecration of graves. This is a religious infraction. Furthermore, many African peoples brought to the US as slaves were Muslim and we feel a special need for their histories to be preserved, so that the record of the contributions of Muslims to the American fabric be whole.

Finally, it is just plain wrong and cruel, an aberration of humanity, to disregard and disrespect the lives and souls of those who should be resting in peace and dignity. And it is a slap in the face of their ancestors that they must fight to preserve that resting place.

We urge that the four amendments above be incorporated and that a favorable report be given on HB1099. Thank you for your consideration.