

**OPPOSE – House Bill 30
Public Utilities – Office of Climate Counsel – Establishment (Climate Counsel Act)
House Economic Matters Committee**

Columbia Gas of Maryland, Inc. opposes House Bill 30, which would establish the Office of Climate Counsel (“OCC”) and the position of Climate Counsel. The OCC would be charged with representing the environmental interests of the State and its residents in proceedings before the Public Service Commission (“PSC”), and would largely be funded through assessments on PSC-regulated utility companies.

While the preservation of the State’s natural resources is an important priority, the creation of a new state agency to represent the environmental interests before the PSC creates new and unnecessary costs that will ultimately be borne by utility consumers because any cost increases arising under this bill would be passed along to utility consumers in the normal ratemaking process conducted by the PSC. Per House Bill 30, the OCC would have the authority to require PSC Staff assistance. This will either reduce the PSC’s resources for utility regulation or drive up the PSC’s assessment. House Bill 30 also creates duplicative costs. The OCC would be authorized to hire experts in the field of utility regulation, cost of capital, rate design, accounting, economics, engineering, transportation, and law. The PSC, however, already employs experts in each of these areas of expertise and these experts are effectively deployed in all proceedings before the PSC. The OCC would also be duplicating the advocacy work of the Office of People’s Counsel (“OPC”). The OPC, which is a statutory advocate charged with representing the interests of residential and non-commercial utility customers in all matters before the PSC, already has the authority to retain experts in these fields. Hence, House Bill 30 creates unnecessary duplication of efforts and resources, and undermines judicial economy. Moreover, it creates the potential that each PSC proceeding becomes a battle of the experts, all of whom are effectively paid for by utility consumers. This is not in the public interest of utility consumers.

Further, an OCC is not needed to ensure that the environmental interests are considered by the PSC. The Public Utilities Article specifically mandates that the PSC consider environmental interests in the regulation of public utilities. § 2-113(a)(2) of the Pub. Util. Co. Article (“In supervising and regulating public service companies, the Commission **shall consider** the public safety, the economy of the State, **the conservation of natural resources, and the preservation of environmental quality**) (emphasis added). Further, environmental advocacy organizations participate in PSC proceedings and advocate for environmental and climate change interests. There is no reason to believe that these organizations are not effectively representing environmental interests before the PSC.

For the reasons set forth above, Columbia Gas opposes House Bill 30 and urges an unfavorable report.

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