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College Park, MD 20740

**Committee: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs**

**Testimony on: SB 716 “Solid Waste Management – Prohibition on Releasing a Balloon into the Atmosphere”**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing Date: February 24, 2021**

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports SB 716, a bill to prohibit the intentional release of balloons into the atmosphere. SB 716 is a simple, yet meaningful way to eliminate a source of harmful litter. Three Maryland counties (Queen Anne’s, Frederick, and Montgomery) have already passed similar legislation. A statewide ban makes sense given that once released, balloons may travel great distances before returning to Earth and thus are a type of litter that does not recognize county boundaries.

A bouquet of colorful balloons floating up into the blue sky can be a beautiful tribute to a loved one or a way to celebrate an important event. Unfortunately, these balloons eventually return to Earth as litter, often tangled in trees or floating in waterways, sometimes many miles from where they were originally released.

In a research report funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, five states in the coastal northeast and mid-Atlantic recognized that balloons are a dangerous type of marine debris that deserve attention.<sup>1</sup> Balloons that end up in waterways pose a serious threat to birds and marine life. Much like plastic bags, when balloons float in the water turtles mistake them for jellyfish and consume them. Balloons and their attached ribbons can be ingested and cause serious injury and death to birds and fish as well. Even on Assateague Island, where balloons are banned, National Park Service officials recently witnessed a wild horse choking on a balloon.<sup>2</sup>

There are many other ways to honor a loved one or mark a special occasion. Commemorative alternatives to balloon releases include planting a native tree or flower garden, floating flowers or flower petals down a stream, lighting candles, and drumming. Celebratory alternatives include using ribbon dancers, kites or pinwheels, and blowing bubbles.

We are pleased that SB 716 has bipartisan support and hope its passage will encourage a wider conversation about the alarming problem of single-use plastic pollution. We respectfully request a favorable report.

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<sup>1</sup> Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean, *Assessment of Marine Debris in the Mid-Atlantic, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Virginia*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Shawn Soper, *Assateague Horse Incident Highlights Balloon Dangers*, Ocean City Dispatch, May 29, 2019.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.