

March 12, 2021

To: Honorable Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee

From: The Undersigned Coalition of Organizations

Re: Opposition to HB980 – The Prince George’s County (Lack of) Ethics Bill

We, the undersigned organizations, whose members live and operate in Prince George’s County, respectfully ask the Committee to report unfavorably on House Bill 980. We have invested our time, energy, and money in making Prince George’s County a desirable place to live, work, attend school, and recreate, and have engaged for many years in the County’s planning and land use processes.

As you know, our county’s government long ago gained a well-deserved national reputation for blatant corruption related to land use, development and related activities that harm residents and the natural environment – so much so that over the years, the General Assembly has been compelled to amend the Maryland Public Ethics Law in ways that are beginning to address that corruption. That corruption and the national notoriety it has brought have long tarnished Maryland’s reputation and embarrassed county residents. HB980 would be a step backwards.

Yet again, the Prince George’s County Council finds itself in violation of Maryland’s Public Ethics Law. The prohibitions and requirements of that law have been codified for years, and the staff of the State Ethics Commission have published guidance on how provisions specific to Prince George’s County are to be interpreted and applied. The rules regarding campaign donations and transparency of transactions have not been hidden from Council members. In fact, those very rules have plagued the Council for at least the last decade. For example, when they were sued for violating them during the Subregion V and VI Master Plan rewrites in what became an eight-year legal battle. Regrettably, it wasn’t an isolated spate of transgressions. Yet, regardless of the many instances when violations regarding campaign donations and lack of transparency have been brought to the attention of the wayward Council, they continue to flaunt breaking the Public Ethics Law regularly and recklessly. While the rest of us are perfectly clear on the rule that a Council member can’t vote on a bill benefitting a person, entity, or their agent if that person, entity, or agent has contributed to their campaign, the County Council can’t seem to get it through their heads.

The County Council’s relentless push to intensify zoning on properties across Prince George’s, in a misguided effort to reap greater profits, especially without case-by-case administrative review by the Zoning Hearing Examiner, Planning Department, Planning Board, and District Council as the new ordinance would allow would come at a horrible cost to county residents and taxpayers like us who deserve a quality of life dictated by benevolent and common sense governance, not a constant scurrying at the bottom of the barrel.

It is now public knowledge that so many councilmembers have accepted money from developers and their agents that the Council cannot attain a quorum to convene a hearing on, and vote on, the abysmal proposed County-wide Zoning Map Amendment that would make sweeping developer-friendly changes to land use and zoning throughout the county at the public's expense. It is not the State's responsibility to enable their errant behavior. Voting for HB980 wouldn't be cleaning up the Council's mess; it would be pouring gas on the fire of their corruption. They knew what they were doing when they accepted donations, when they decided not to be transparent about those donations, and generally violated the Public Ethics Law. Such behavior should not be rewarded.

If the County Council cannot move forward without disqualifying council members who have received political contributions from persons, entities, or agents seeking zoning changes, then they cannot move forward. They must be made to maintain the same modicum of decency that is required throughout the rest of the state. This kind of nonsense sits poorly with us, their constituents.

We hope you will join us in opposing HB980, and demand that the Prince George's County Council be held to basic ethical standards that the law requires and that their constituents have a right to expect of all elected officials. This loophole – that would let a Trojan horse of a zoning rewrite through the door – must be closed to protect the public and preserve our precious few remaining opportunities to participate meaningfully in the zoning process. And, most importantly, because the Public Ethics Law is in place for a reason. Our County Council must act with their constituents' interests in mind, not those of developers and their agents, whether in relation to the zoning rewrite or any other governance of land use.

Thank you for your kind consideration, and for upholding standards of decent practices for public servants in Prince George's County.

Accokeek, Mattawoman, Piscataway Creeks Communities Council (AMP Creeks)

Cedar Haven on the Patuxent River, Inc.

Clean Air Prince George's

Concerned Citizens of Prince George's County District 4 and the Surrounding Areas

Friends of Oxon Hill

Greater Accokeek Progressive Association

Greenbelt Climate Action Network

Maryland Legislative Coalition

Moyaone Association

Patuxent Riverkeeper

Southern Maryland Audubon Society, Inc.