



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

OPPOSE HB0991

Natural Resources - Forest Mitigation Banks - Qualified Conservation Tree Planting
Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee

Good afternoon Chair Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee. My name is Dick Williams. I am a representative of GreenGrace, the lay-led environmental ministry of the Maryland Episcopal Diocese. The Diocese consists of 108 parishes and over 45,000 parishioners, stretching from Western Maryland to Calvert County. GreenGrace and the Maryland Episcopal Diocese strongly oppose HB0991.

The benefits of trees are well known and include drawing down carbon from the atmosphere, which is at climate crisis levels currently, reducing airborne particulate matter before being inhaled, and helping combat the heat island effect. When enough trees are present, psychological distress drops, as has been reported in numerous studies. More trees provide greater capture of stormwater, thus easing up overburdened, outdated sewer infrastructure. Trees are also a vital component of ecosystems, providing food and shelter to countless organisms.

HB0991 goes in the opposite direction. If enacted, this legislation would codify practices that result in greater forest loss due to real estate development “without providing an effective preservation benefit,” as noted by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF). The timing of this bill is unhelpful. It would be helpful, rather, to wait for the completion of the forest mitigation study directed by the General Assembly pursuant to SB0729 of 2019.

Maryland’s Forest Conservation Act was passed in 1991 to reduce forest loss from new construction development project. The Act requires replanting of trees to offset a bare minimum of losses on development sites. This planting requirement leads to a smaller net loss of forest than if the law did not exist.

HB0991 would authorize a tragic reversal by permitting forest mitigation banks to offer credit for placing a preservation easement on trees that already exist, rather than planting new trees. To illustrate, as per CBF advice, this process would allow development projects to remove up to 100% of the forest on a site with no replanting required at all. In addition, with no specified ratio required in the bill, development projects could get away with “half or less that required by the very limited authorization in existing law,” as the CBF notes.

GreenGrace and the Maryland Episcopal Diocese respectfully request a vote against HB0991.