

Testimony of Kallan Benson

To Maryland House Environment & Transportation Committee

In Support of

HB0082: Constitutional Amendment - Environmental Rights

I am 16 years old and I know the future that will result from our current social and environmental priorities. I know it because I understand science, I trust science, and I use science to inform my actions.

If I did not, nothing would stop me from giving my testimony in person. That option is not available because of the coronavirus pandemic. I can't speak to you in person today because of the failure of adults and leaders of the world to manage the environment in a safe sustainable way, selfishly opting for exploitation that has resulted in a deadly global pandemic. Science warned that it was coming, but science was ignored until it was too late.

As a teenager, the virus does not pose much threat to me, but protecting those most vulnerable in our society requires me to follow science and take action. The children of Maryland are making sacrifices today. We're giving up our hobbies, our sports, our social lives... We're compromising our educations, our earnings, our futures... every day, right now, to protect society, to protect adults like you.

If I wasn't committed to science, if I wasn't willing to make that sacrifice, I would be visiting your offices. I would be lobbying to get your support on this bill. Two years ago, I spent every day at the State House during the General Assembly, crocheting butterflies, and sitting in silence on Lawyers Mall. At 14, I chose not to talk for your 90-day session because I hoped my silence would speak louder than my words.

Rachel Carson wrote a book to open peoples' eyes to the damage we were creating with our actions. I hoped my silent spring would open your ears, focus your hearing, and help you listen to the voice of future generations. All indications are that our voices remain silent to you. Our interests, our warnings are ignored just like science. We are sacrificing for your health today. Is it too much to ask for you to ensure us the right to a healthful environment tomorrow?

In 1973, the Maryland General Assembly passed the Maryland Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), recognizing "each person has the fundamental and inalienable right to a healthful environment." It further stated that this policy rises to the level of highest priority, but it included no enforcement power. So for 48 years, this foundational principle of the MEPA has been largely ignored.

HB82 requires our leaders to consider the right to a healthful environment on par with all other civil rights, ensuring that this right would be enforceable, and that environmental health is treated as a top priority now so that the health of all Marylanders including those of our future generations remain protected. Our future requires this legislature to pass and enforce robust environmental legislation and policies to protect current and future generations from harm due to environmental degradation and pollution. This amendment will become the legal foundation and rationale to support and enforce such legislation.

## Testimony of Kallan Benson in Support of HB0082

I have stood with and support youth from across Maryland, including youth in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods where environmental pollution and degradation are often concentrated. I understand that our current prosperity is based on the exploitation of, not only future generations but also, our current communities suffering disproportionate health disparities, including increased rates of asthma hospitalization, heart disease, and cancer. These inequities demand that we protect the right for all to a healthful environment in our state constitution. HB82 will addresses these environmental inequities.

Despite the forward-thinking words of the MEPA, Maryland leadership has not prioritized a healthy environment, and Marylanders continue to suffer from unclean air, water, soil, and an increasingly unstable climate. Children in Baltimore suffer from asthma at rates more than twice the national average, a condition that makes them more likely to die from COVID-19. Their concerns are being ignored. Their health has been sacrificed. Some of their voices may be silenced forever because Maryland leaders have not prioritized a healthy environment for 48 years.

Last year, I stood before the United Nations Environmental Program. On behalf of Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, I refused to accept their award acknowledging all of us in the movement as Champions of the Earth. We are children. We don't have power, yet, and our current course of action suggests the world may be very different when we do. We can't be Champions of the Earth; we need our leaders to earn that title.

We are sacrificing today, every day, to protect your health, our society, and those most vulnerable. My peers and future generations are the most vulnerable for actions in the General Assembly that impact the environment of Maryland. Please issue a favorable report on HB82 to ensure a healthy environment for us all.

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