

February 11, 2021

Testimony on HB 344
Open Meetings Act - Requirements for State Agencies and Local Boards of Elections
(Maryland Transparency Act of 2021)
Health and Government Operations

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland support HB 344 which would significantly increase access to and the efficiency of State agencies in the Executive Branch and local board of elections meeting processes by requiring that meeting agendas, materials be made available in advance of these meetings online. Also, that meetings be made publicly available by live stream, and that these streams and meeting minutes be archived.

Streaming video and online access to meeting materials are easy and efficient ways to enhance Marylanders' access to agencies throughout the State. This access and transparency is particularly necessary for agencies in the Executive Branch, like the Board of Public Works, which is tasked with making financial decisions that can have huge effects on the lives and livelihoods of Marylanders and their families. Also, local boards of elections oversee the process most fundamental to our democracy: elections. As local boards prepare for future elections, it is important that Marylanders are able to have access to meetings where decision made will impact them and their communities.

For too many citizens, the work done by State agencies and local boards of election is a distant and often undecipherable series of activities. Many Marylanders are unable to go to meeting locations in person but have a strongly vested interest in the policies and decisions being made by these agencies. For those who can attend meetings, they are often don't have access to meeting agendas and at times travel only to be met with closed sessions.

As technology makes information in all its forms more readily available, Maryland should continue seeking ways to utilize these technologies to increase accessibility to information across the state. The technology to live-stream is inexpensive, widespread, and allows all Marylanders to participate. Archiving the streams and meeting materials ensure those who are unable to watch the live stream have access to the footage.

We understand the bill sponsor is seeking an opinion from the Attorney General on whether the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission established by the Governor would fall under the requirements of this bill. If not, we urge the committee to amend the bill to ensure the work of the commission is transparent and accessible to the public.

HB 344 would vastly increase Marylanders' access to the meetings of State agencies in the Executive Branch and local boards of elections. We urge the committee to report favorably.