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Judicial Proceedings Committee Hearing January 14, 2021

Testimony in Opposition to SB 339

Good day Mr. Chairman and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer written and oral testimony on Senate Bill 339.

It was my privilege and honor to serve as the Maryland Secretary of State from 1995 to 2003. One of the duties and responsibilities I had as secretary of state was participation in the numerous, varied activities of the Maryland Sister State program. The Sister State program, first established in 1980, is an important part of the international affairs of the Maryland Office of Secretary of State.

The premise of SB 339 is flawed insofar as the Sister State program, in Maryland and throughout the country, involves far more than economic transactions and business development. The Sister State program fosters and encourages understanding among people and governments through cultural, diplomatic, educational, governmental, political, social, and technical exchanges as well as business relationships. Lifetime relationships between and among individuals and groups are created benefiting not only the individuals but also the participating, groups, organizations and governments.

As Maryland Secretary of State I was active in the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS, the oldest intergovernmental organization in the United States dating to 1905), and co-chaired the NASS International Relations Committee. A regular part of the NASS annual meetings and activities is the promotion of international affairs. As secretary of state, I supported the efforts of the U.S. State Department in working with foreign governments and interacted with foreign embassies and consulates on behalf of the State of Maryland.

During my tenure as Maryland Secretary of State, the Governor's SubCabinet for International Affairs was established in 2001 in an effort to organize and coordinate the various international activities of state agencies. See Governor's Executive Order 01.01.2005.24 Governor's Subcabinet for International Affairs (Amends Executive Order 01.01.2001.20).

There is no public policy benefit in fracturing the international affairs of the State of Maryland by transferring the Sister State program to the Department of Commerce and, in fact, such a transfer would harm the state's international relationships and standing. Therefore, I submit this written testimony in opposition to SB 339 and urge that this committee act unfavorably on the proposed bill.

Respectfully submitted,

John T. Willis
Maryland Secretary of State, 1995-2003.