



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 9, 2022

Testimony in support of HB 1238
Places of Public Accommodation - Motion Picture Houses - Captioning

Chair Wilson and Members of the Economic Matters Committee,

They say that politics is a game of addition. To win, you have to appeal to more people. The same is true in business. More paying customers means more profit. House Bill 1238 is about addition. This bill is about equity. This bill is about bringing audiences back to movie theaters, including thousands of folks who might not normally go. Seems like smart business to me.

HB 1238 would require movie theaters to offer open captioning, meaning captioning up on the big screen, for two screenings per movie per week. Smaller theaters might offer a handful of screenings per week. Others might offer a dozen or more. I don't think it's an overreach to ask that just two of these include captions. Frankly, when we weigh the number of people this would benefit against the number it would hurt, it's surprising movie theaters don't already do this.

Many of the dozens of testimonials in support of this bill focus on its impact for deaf and hard of hearing people, a group which has historically been locked out of moviegoing entirely. In recent years, some developments have made it possible for these folks to attend screenings with closed captions shown on little handheld devices. Still, these have to be proactively requested, can be distracting, out of sync or plagued with technical problems. Just take a moment to imagine that you're at the movies, and there's no sound. You have to glance back and forth between the action on screen and a little device in your lap to keep track of what everyone is saying. Does that sound like it's worth the ever-higher price of a ticket?

But let's expand our scope here. Imagine seniors who can hear okay, but often miss a mumbled line or a classic Marvel quip thrown out between the sounds of bullets, explosions and alien growls, not to mention a roaring soundtrack. Do you think elderly folks are keen on the idea of reading captions on a little handheld screen? What about parents who want their kids to learn as many new words as possible? We have good data showing that watching movies with captions can have a direct positive impact on child literacy. What about English learners of any age, not only trying to translate lines in their heads, but trying to follow the nuance, humor and cultural references that will help them improve their own communication. These are all potential customers who could feel a lot more welcome at a screening with open captions.

Movie theater owners have been in touch to share their concerns with me. We all know that the pandemic devastated the industry. I earnestly believe that this bill can help, not hinder, the recovery, or else I would not have brought it to your attention. I believe in addition, and in encouraging more customers to patronize our local businesses. I am not asking for a blanket mandate. If a customer has a particularly strong objection to open captions, they can simply choose to attend a different screening. For too long, too many people have been denied this choice. Who can say how many ticket sales have been sacrificed?

In light of all this, I request a favorable report.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Bhandari", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

The Honorable Delegate Harry Bhandari
Maryland Legislative District 8