March 24, 2022

Testimony on HB 246
Open Meetings Act – Notices, Closed Sessions, and Minutes – Retention Periods, Online Posting, and Public Inspection
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland support HB 246 which would strengthen the Open Meeting Act, specifically expanding access to meeting materials of public bodies. This change increases the transparency of public meetings and ensures the ability for meaningful public participation.

This legislation increases the length of time that public bodies must retain meeting notices and closing statements from one year to three years. While the current one-year retention period was a step in the right direction when enacted, technology has since advanced. Maryland should take advantage of these advancements to ensure these materials are posted online and use them to increase our retention of this information.

The advantages of retaining this information for longer periods are many. Longer retention allows for the public and public bodies to more easily access longer periods of meeting data, increasing institutional knowledge. More importantly, the impacts of public bodies' decisions can often only become evident long after those decisions are made. Allowing the public, a longer period of time to go back and see how those decisions were made increases their ability to hold the decision-makers accountable.

Retention of meeting information is an integral part of the Open Meetings Act and the spirit in which it was passed. Meeting materials give the public more transparency into the decision-making processes of government entities. Keeping this information for longer periods can only serve to increase the abilities of citizens to understand the workings of their government and hold their officials accountable for their actions.

Transparency and accountability are important in all aspects of a functioning democracy. HB 246 increases transparency and data accessibility for the public and we request a favorable report.