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February 23, 2022

The Honorable Kumar Barve
Chair, Environment and Transportation
Maryland House of Delegates
251 Taylor House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Dana Stein
Vice Chair, Environment and Transportation
Maryland House of Delegates
251 Taylor House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

On behalf of Chesapeake Conservancy, I write to urge your support for the Great Maryland Outdoors Act (HB 727 / SB 541) sponsored by Delegate Eric Luedtke and Senator Sarah Elfreth and to move this bill favorably from committee.

HB 727 responds to the findings of the State Park Investment Commission, a bipartisan and bicameral commission created by the Speaker of the House and the Senate President in 2021 to assess the current and future needs of the Maryland State Park system. Chaired by former Governor Parris Glendening, Senator Elfreth, and Delegate Luedtke, the commission conducted a thorough investigation of Maryland state parks, reviewing challenges related to park capacity, maintenance, staffing, funding, equity and climate change. The commission facilitated several hearings featuring testimony from a large and diverse set of stakeholders. Chesapeake Conservancy was pleased to provide testimony to the commission on two separate occasions on the role of state parks in Maryland's overall conservation efforts and on inclusive visitor engagement at state parks.

The commission's final report highlights the many challenges facing Maryland's state park system but also the many opportunities to improve our parks for the benefit of Maryland residents and visitors today and well into the future. HB 727 responds to these challenges and opportunities by investing in new parks and expanded parks, critical maintenance and operations, and by directing action to improve accessibility and equity in the park system, along with other improvements. This investment comes at a critical moment for Maryland's state parks, many of which are severely underfunded, understaffed and in need of investment and improvement so that they can meet the growing needs of Marylanders for space in which to recreate and enjoy nature.

HB 727 would make substantial changes to Chapter 10 of 2016 which is the statutory reimbursement of diverted transfer tax funding to Program Open Space and related land conservation programs. Notably, the bill would repeal funding directed to Program Open Space stateside and Program Open Space local through Chapter 10 and instead direct that funding to the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund (a new fund created by HB 727).

Chesapeake Conservancy serves as co-chair of the Partners for Open Space and we advocate strongly for continued and full funding of Program Open Space and the conservation programs funded through the real estate transfer tax. We strongly opposed the previous diversions away from Program Open Space which amounted to more than \$1 billion dollars in the past two decades. Those diversions directly contributed to a decrease in conservation efforts across the state of Maryland, resulting in less protected open space for Marylanders. However, we acknowledge the urgent and immediate need to invest in Maryland's state parks and the need for this new fund. Importantly, the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund would include \$30 million for land acquisition efforts to expand parks and create new parks. Therefore, on this limited basis involving changes to funding that would have otherwise been directed to Program Open Space, we support HB 727 as it affects Chapter 10 of 2016.

The Great Maryland Outdoors Act has been described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvest in Maryland's state park system, and we echo that sentiment. Marylanders are demanding access to parks and open space like never before, putting a significant strain on existing parks and park facilities. Today, access to parks and greenspace is not equitable: many communities across Maryland are unable to get to parks due to transportation constraints and the location of existing parks. Today we have the unique opportunity to invest in Maryland's park system and make access to parks more equitable so that current and future generations can enjoy and benefit from Maryland's state parks.

Thank you for considering my testimony, and I urge your support for HB 727.

Sincerely,



Joel Dunn
President and CEO
Chesapeake Conservancy