

Committee: Environment & Transportation

Testimony on: HB 880 - Environment - Impact of Actions on Climate, Labor, and Environmental Justice (“Maryland Climate Equity Act”)

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: March 2, 2022

Thank you for this opportunity to offer written testimony. Thanks also to Tracy Garrett of Lothian and Monica Brooks from the Eastern Shore who have provided actual and verbal tours of the toxic sacrifice zones in which they live. They have recently testified (November 23, 2021) before Maryland’s Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities.

HB 880 would elevate the voices of residents, like Ms. Brooks and Dr. Garrett, currently living in toxic conditions and/or threatened with state-sanctioning of more life-threatening events. **Without requiring state agencies to consider how their actions will affect these communities, they will continue to fail to do so.**

This morning (**February 28, 2022**) the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released their latest report**, and U.N. Secretary General Guterres responded by saying that “people and the planet are being clobbered by climate change now!” We know that globally the people with fewest resources, those least responsible for the climate crisis, bear the brunt of climate impacts. This is also true of Maryland. **By defining environmental justice communities, HB 880 creates a necessary path for our state to equitably plan for adaptation and mitigation.**

I live in Garrett County and worked in Allegany County. Allegany County has the 2nd highest rate of persons living in poverty, one of the highest opioid addiction rates in Maryland, and mountain MD counties have the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the state. **The two westernmost counties have a legacy of polluting, extractive industries manifest in the poor quality of public health of this Appalachia-defined region.**

I am a public health educator and know that addressing environmental justice improves public health and advances health equity. Many actions that limit climate change also improve the health of families and communities.

Air pollution not only drives climate change, it significantly increases asthma attacks, respiratory failure, and cardiovascular disease, **disproportionately affecting poor people and BIPOC communities whose homes tend to be nearer to** industrial sites, toxic waste depots, heavily trafficked highways — especially with diesel truck traffic, **and all that is ugly and unhealthy that those with more resources are able to avoid or move away from.**

COVID-19 is instructive to us about the accumulating damage to the human body and cumulative impacts endemic to discrimination and poverty. Long-term exposure to air pollution is associated with an increased risk of becoming sick with COVID-19 and respiratory diseases such as influenza or pneumonia. The diabetes and obesity predictive of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths is linked to pesticides, endocrine disrupting chemicals, and chemically manipulated sweeteners in our food supply, aggressively marketed and saturating our poorest neighborhoods and rural areas, where often the only food available is at a Dollar General.

Add to that the inability to travel to healthy food and health care. Mass transport and electrifying the transportation system, which would reduce air pollution and climate-forcing emissions, would improve public health. **Lack of access to public transportation is the top workforce development and health services access issue in far western MD.** In Allegany and Garrett counties, there is no local public bus service and only a once daily train, traveling from Cumberland to D.C and back, which is often late as Amtrak does not own or control the tracks and prioritizes freight over passengers. My county has no ride share apps or taxi service.

Environmental health is public health. The public health consequences of air pollution, rising temperatures, more extreme weather events and rising sea level will disproportionately affect the health and safety of Maryland's most vulnerable residents.

HB 880 requires that Maryland agencies consider these burdens and any "pre-existing conditions," if you will, before permitting or resourcing damaging conditions.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
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News from last week about Environmental Justice community actions:

"Toxic tours offer a way for non-community members, such as legislators, activists, and students, to truly understand the effects of environmental injustice in a community." This article highlights toxic tours given in Chicago neighborhoods.

"The practice of toxic tours began in the mid-1980s, when members of the environmental movement were **first beginning to connect race and class with pollution**. The tours were devised to educate the public about what would eventually be known as environmental racism. The conversation was catapulted to the fore by an instance in North Carolina where tons of PCB-polluted soil were dumped intentionally in a Black community, which led to a report on "Toxic Wastes and Race" in 1987."

"A Chicago Neighborhood is Redefining Toxicity in Pursuit of Environmental Justice," (Yes!, February 23, 2022).

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2022/02/23/chicago-environmental-justice-pollution>

You may have recently seen or heard the news about methane gas leaks found in D.C., some potentially explosive. Rosa Lee, one of the residents who helped identify these leaks, said “once you learn more, you do more with what you know.” (*Washington Post*, “Hundreds of gas leaks found in D.C. — some ‘potentially explosive,’ report says,” February 23, 2022).

HB 880 will help community members learn more and do more!