

Thursday January 27, 2022

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of the House Environment & Transportation Committee and Committee Members
FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations and Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst
POSITION: Support HB 141 Equity in Transportation Sector - Guidelines and Analyses

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 141 offered by Delegate Ruth. HB 141 aims to better represent our state's transportation system users by ensuring equity is prioritized in transportation planning, reporting, goal setting and implementation and by increasing community members' influence in the decision-making process in this sector. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) announced significant service cuts across the Baltimore region in order to reduce its capital budget. The proposed cuts included reducing available buses and routes that students use to get to schools, eliminating a number of commuter buses, reducing MARC trains, and eliminating the only bus route between Baltimore and Annapolis. This would have resulted in restricted access to economic opportunities including jobs as well as necessary goods and services, a greater burden on working parents who may need to get their kids to school or increased safety risks for students who need to find their own way to school, and removing even the limited access that many Baltimore residents have to the democratic process in the state capitol. TNC joined with local elected officials, community members, and advocacy organizations from both within the Baltimore region and across the state to oppose these inequitable cuts. HB 141 would allow community members' to have a greater say regarding service changes that would significantly impact their everyday lives and access to new opportunities.

When compared to its peer agencies in other states across the nation, the MTA transit system, including subway, light rail, buses, and MARC commuter trains, each rank among the worst for breakdown rates. MTA buses break down approximately twice as frequently as buses in many major Northeast cities, which also poses an equity issue as the majority of riders who use our core and commuter bus services are Black or Asian according to the MTA's ridership demographics. Failures in our paratransit services leaves riders with disabilities late or stranded, potentially missing necessary healthcare and treatment appointments.

In addition to posing a safety risk to transit workers and riders, reliability and connectivity issues restrict access for those riders who depend on our public transit system to commute to job centers, schools, healthcare facilities, childcare, grocery stores, and recreational activities. More than a third of transit riders in Maryland are essential workers. Lack of reliable transportation could put their jobs at risk

The transportation sector is the largest contributor to climate change in Maryland. It accounts for approximately 40% of greenhouse gas emissions statewide, predominately from on-road sources. Gas-powered vehicles also emit air pollutants like particulate matter that harm pulmonary and cardiovascular health, including triggering asthma attacks. These dangerous health risks disproportionately impact Black and brown communities and low-income neighborhoods. A safe, reliable, accessible, and well-connected transit system is crucial to promoting public health, equity, and jobs.

We commend Delegate Ruth on introducing this bill, which would better ensure our transit workers' and riders' safety, promote equitable access to jobs, schools and other necessities, and protect the health of our citizens.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 141.