

February 21, 2023

Testimony on HB 498

Board of Public Works Comment Act

Appropriations

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of HB 498, which would improve the transparency, accountability, and accessibility of the Board of Public Works by allowing public comments to be submitted electronically, and requiring comments to be retained and made available to the public. The Board of Public Works has both enormous power and enormous responsibility, overseeing large state expenditures, funding for agencies, projects, and procurement contracts. The decisions of the Board have significant effects on the people of Maryland, yet those being impacted have little opportunity to make their voices heard.

As it stands, the official BPW website is a skeleton. To say that the information provided - particularly regarding Board meetings and public comments - is insufficient would be an understatement. Those wanting to weigh in on agenda items are told to send an email request, but are told upfront that being approved to speak doesn't guarantee you will get to do so. The current process asks citizens to step away from their responsibilities (work, children, personal needs,) travel to Annapolis, and wait for an unknown amount of time to speak to the Board. Alternatively, they may travel all that way just for the Board to skip discussion on the matter entirely. The current process discourages Marylanders from making their voices heard on consequential projects and expenditures – ones being funded by their taxpayer dollars. This process is not accessible, and sends the message that the Board doesn't truly value the input of its constituents.

HB 498 would affirm the voice of the public as critical to Maryland's highest administrative authority, holding the people's elected and appointed representatives accountable. It is vital that citizens be able to submit public comments on Board matters electronically, so that every Marylander can make their voice heard on the issues that impact them. It is also vital to preserve these comments and make them easily accessible for the public to view – a practice already being implemented successfully for General Assembly proceedings.

We strongly urge a favorable report.