

Tuesday, February 21, 2023

TO: Ben Barnes, Chair of House Appropriations Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support HB 491 Transportation – Commission to Study Establishing a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 491 offered by Delegate Boyce. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

HB 491 creates a Commission to study establishing a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority (BRTA). Comprised of members appointed by Baltimore City and County governments, as well as members who represent transit workers, advocates and transportation users, the Commission will be tasked with conducting a comprehensive study to delve into all aspects around establishing the BRTA. The study will look closely into how a BRTA will support communities' needs in the Baltimore region, how the system could be structured and function within the community, and identify specific details related to this new system's economic and labor implications. It will also include ample opportunity for stakeholder groups' input through the Commission's tenure, allowing for advice and guidance from labor unions, community organizations, employers, transit users, and advocates to ensure the BRTA's structure will address and meet community needs.

The transportation sector is the largest contributor to climate change in our country, our region, and in Maryland. It accounts for approximately 40% of greenhouse gas emissions statewide, predominately from on-road sources. Air pollution caused by increased congestion and reliance on personal vehicles harms respiratory health in heavily trafficked areas. These respiratory health problems, including asthma, 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. The Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022 set state goals to reduce emissions by 60 percent by 2031 and reach net-zero by 2045. In order to meet these ambitious goals, Maryland needs to take immediate actions to mitigate emissions in the state's highest producing sectors. By establishing the BTRA, Maryland would be taking a marked step in improving regional transportation, which will reduce reliance on single use vehicles and expand access to mass transit options in the Baltimore region.

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. Our MTA buses break down approximately twice as frequently as buses in many major Northeast cities. Failures in our paratransit services are particularly burdensome for riders with disabilities. In addition to posing a safety risk to transit workers and riders, maintenance and repair issues cause low reliability and 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 can put their jobs at risk.

By establishing the BRTA, transportation decisions can be made by people who live in Baltimore and use these transportation services. Regional governance over the transit system will also allow for more flexibility in applying for federal grant funding as well as in choosing transportation projects that support and address the community's needs. This will increase jobs in public transit, improve safety, reliability, and accessibility when commuting to job centers, and reduce dependence on personal vehicles in Baltimore and the surrounding communities.

TNC commends Delegate Boyce for introducing this bill, which will create the enabling conditions to establish the Baltimore Regional Transit Authority, improving transportation options and availability in the Baltimore region and ultimately leading to increased transit accessibility and reduced carbon emissions from vehicles in Maryland.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 491.