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**Committee:** Appropriations

**Testimony on:** HB491 – “Transportation – Commission to Study Establishing a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority”

**Position:** Favorable with amendments

**Hearing Date:** February 21, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports HB491. The bill would create a commission to study establishing a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) that could acquire and operate transit systems, levy taxes or fees and enter into contracts with other entities. The BRTA also would identify potential impacts to existing labor and service contracts with the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) and locally-operated transit systems (LOTS). The BRTA could also identify potential funding sources for the transit authority, including eligibility for federal and state grants.

Among the 35 largest metropolitan transit agencies in this country, the transit “agency” serving the Baltimore region is the only one governed by a state agency, the Maryland Transit Administration, that receives no oversight from a board of locally-elected city or regional officials or their designees. The current approach has proven to be ineffective, unreliable, and unresponsive to public demands, and it should be changed.

The concept of a fully independent, Baltimore-based, regional transit authority to incorporate local and regional perspectives in the planning, design, funding, and potentially operation of transit services in the Baltimore region has been publicly endorsed by the Mayor of Baltimore and County Executives of Anne Arundel, Baltimore, and Howard Counties. Governor Moore’s stated commitment to improving the transit system serving the Baltimore region, as well as to consult with locally elected officials to decide on future directions, suggests that a commission to study establishing a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority deserves our support.

We have a number of amendments that we think would improve this bill. First, we recommend that membership on the commission should include more individuals who ride transit regularly, a representative of environmental justice communities, and a representative of riders with disabilities or a disability rights advocacy organization.

A second amendment would require the commission to actively consult with the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board – the federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization responsible for developing the 4-year transportation improvement plan for the region – to receive funding from the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act). Similarly, the BRTA needs to get established with the Federal Transit Administration as a designated recipient of public transportation formula funds for the service area it oversees.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.

A third amendment would stipulate that the BRTA would not privatize public-sector transit jobs that now reside in the MTA and LOTS, and would protect the wages, working conditions and collective bargaining rights of its workers.

Our fourth and final amendment would stipulate that the commission complete its study by December 1, 2023, so that enabling legislation to create the BRTA could be introduced in the 2024 legislative session. The Baltimore Metropolitan Council and Baltimore Regional Transportation Board have already been studying the issue for several years, so reaching conclusions regarding the BRTA structure, powers, responsibilities, and funding should not take the Commission until October 31, 2024.

The Baltimore region has suffered too long from inadequate and unreliable transit services from the MTA and LOTS. A major change of direction is needed, and the study called for in HB491 should resolve important issues that must be decided to create and implement a well-functioning BRTA that meets the needs of the region. We urge a favorable report on this bill.

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