

Facilitating Public Comment on Board of Public Works Actions Promotes Transparency and Inclusion

Position Statement in Support of Senate Bill 328

Given before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

Maryland's budget is the clearest reflection of our values and priorities as a state. A transparent and open budget process is critical to ensuring state spending reflects public priorities. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports Senate Bill 328, which builds on other recent budget process reforms** that help the governor and legislature work more collaboratively, promote greater citizen involvement, and increase accountability.

The Board of Public Works (BPW) is able to make significant budget cuts that affect state services, employment, and the economy with little review by legislators or the public. It also has the important role of providing oversight for major state contracts.

A 2016 requirement to provide a minimum of three business days' notice of proposed budget cuts or other agenda items going before the BPW was an improvement over the past policy. However, without a defined public comment process, it is still very challenging for interested Marylanders to provide input on measures going before the Board.

SB 328 would require the Board to create an online system for the public to easily submit comments via the BPW website and would require that submitted comments be published as part of the board packet. The bill also allows a reasonable timeline to create such a system and provides funding for a staff position to help facilitate the public comment process.

While all of the BPW members are elected officials – directly elected in the case of the Governor and Comptroller and indirectly in the case of the Treasurer – the people holding these positions are not easily accessible to the general public by nature of the offices they hold, no matter their intentions. This gives outsized influence to professional lobbyists and others with a direct connection to a BPW member.

Creating a more accessible process for public comment via Senate Bill 328 is an opportunity to continue to increase the level of transparency, fairness and inclusion in the Maryland state budget process, building on actions of the last few years. And, it would give the members of the BPW greater insight into public perception of matters they are considering.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Budget and Taxation Committee give a favorable report to Senate Bill 328.

Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 328

Bill Summary

Senate Bill 328 would require the Board of Public Works to create a system for online submission of public comments about items on the Board's agenda and would also publish submitted comments to the website. It would apply to BPW meetings starting in October 2024. The bill provides one staff person to facilitate the public comment process.

Background

The Maryland Constitution allows the Board of Public Works, composed of the governor, the comptroller and the state treasurer, to unilaterally reduce most appropriations by up to 25 percent. The board is also responsible for reviewing and providing oversight for major state contracts.

In calendar year 2020, BPW made more than \$400 million in budget cuts.

Equity Implications

Maryland's investments in essential services like education, health care, and transportation support our state economy and are especially vital for Marylanders who face economic roadblocks because of low income or the ongoing legacy of racist policy.

Ensuring adequate time for the public to consider budgetary actions will enable better understanding of the equity implications of proposed cuts or state contracts.

Impact

Senate Bill 328 would likely **improve racial, gender, and economic equity in Maryland.**