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Committee: Economic Matters

Testimony on: HB459 “County and Municipal Street Lighting Investment Act”

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: February 16, 2023

The Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on HB459. The bill establishes procedures by which a county or municipality may acquire certain utility-owned street lighting equipment located in the county or municipality, and then convert the street lighting service to a customer-owned street lighting tariff under state law. The bill is enabling and does not require any particular county or municipality to take such action.

As set forth in the bill’s legislative findings, the change from utility-owned street lighting to local government ownership can have important benefits. These include reducing energy usage, which in turn will assist the State in reaching its greenhouse gas reduction goals, as well as saving money for local governments and improving public safety through the installation of more durable street lights.

According to a 2020 report published by the Maryland Energy Administration,¹ there are tens of thousands of older, inefficient utility-owned street lights in Maryland. These street lights consume large amounts of energy, and also burn out and require expensive, frequent maintenance. Converting Maryland’s street lights to durable, efficient LED technology would help reduce Maryland’s greenhouse gas emissions while also improving the safety of communities for people who are driving, bicycling, or walking.²

Local governments have a crucial role to play in mitigating climate change, and should lead by example in all efforts to decrease greenhouse gas emissions. This bill will speed the transition to modern LED street lights by facilitating local government ownership. As detailed in MEA’s report, converting utility-owned lights to government-owned lights is a best practice that has worked well in other jurisdictions. States that have passed similar laws or taken regulatory action include Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New

¹ “LED Streetlight Conversions in Maryland and Virginia: Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategies in 2020,” <https://news.maryland.gov/mea/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2020/10/FINAL-LED-Streetlights-in-Maryland-20200929.pdf>.

² According to the report, “[s]treetlighting can account for as much as 40% of all electricity consumed by a municipal government. Expense reductions are achieved by replacing old light fixtures with light-emitting diode or ‘LED’ technologies. . . . LEDs deliver streetlighting levels comparable to – or better than – older technologies but do so while consuming 50-70% less electricity than the high-pressure sodium or mercury vapor lamps that they replace.” Report at 4.

York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. For a variety of reasons, local governments may be better positioned and have greater incentives than utilities to convert to LED street lights.

Another potential benefit of this legislation is that it will give local governments the ability to reduce artificial lighting at night, by giving them greater flexibility in the style of light fixtures and providing for part-night dimming. As discussed in a January 2023 article in Science magazine,³ artificial lighting at night can have a deleterious impact on human and animal behavior, as well as human culture.

When it comes to achieving our energy efficiency and climate goals, and benefiting the environment, street lighting should be a low hanging fruit. We believe that this bill is a commonsense step that will help achieve these goals while improving safety and providing improved services at a lower cost.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on this legislation.

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³ Science Magazine, January 19, 2023, vol. 379, no. 6629, “Light Pollution is Skyrocketing,” <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adf4952>.