

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment 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 SB 880 – Baltimore Regional Water Governance Task Force

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 880 offered by Senator Sydnor. 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.

SB 880 creates a Baltimore Regional Water Governance Task Force, which will study water and wastewater governance in Baltimore. The Task Force will be responsible for reviewing existing regional governance models, assessing these as well as alternative structures for the utility, analyzing fiscal implications and finally recommending a governance model best suited for the Baltimore region. This process will ultimately result in a model that is most appropriate to improve management, operations, billing, capital planning and rate stability for the Baltimore water and wastewater utilities' customers.

The regional water and wastewater utilities in Baltimore City, Baltimore County and surrounding jurisdictions are currently operating under an agreement that is over 50 years old. In this agreement, Baltimore City carries the responsibility for water supply and wastewater operations, maintenance, and capital investments for a system that serves nearly 1.8 million residents. SB 880 will assist in modernizing the water and wastewater utilities by requiring the Task Force to analyze models and recommend a governance structure that will take into consideration changes to the Baltimore region over the past half century. This will include variables such as changes to population growth as well as ensuring equitable cost sharing for all jurisdictions covered by the utility system. The new recommended system of governance will deliver efficient, equitable, and sustainable essential services to the residents of Baltimore City, Baltimore County and the surrounding communities.

TNC has been working with elected officials in Baltimore City and Baltimore County to explore potential avenues for creating a Regional Resilience Authority. Resilience Authorities allow local governments to prioritize interventions toward their most pressing impacts from climate change based on local geographic, economic, and social factors; and to develop projects that minimize and mitigate those challenges. Establishing a Resilience Authority within the Baltimore region would provide opportunities to fund critical projects aimed toward building local resilience and reducing environmental hazards. A Regional Resilience Authority would identify projects eligible for federal grant funds and other independent funding sources. This would also provide a provide a flexible financing system for innovative sustainability infrastructure projects that compliment ongoing state, regional, and local investments to prepare existing infrastructure and create new infrastructure to be capable of withstanding the increasing climate threats. TNC recommends amending SB 880 to expand the Baltimore Regional Water Governance Task Force's scope to engage on resilient infrastructure and flood mitigation.

Recommendations: We recommend that each Task Force member have knowledge of flood mitigation and resilient infrastructure. We also recommend that the Task Force assess how different regional approaches may improve flood mitigation and infrastructure resilience and preparedness for current and future environmental hazards. In addition to these recommendations, TNC also supports the amendments proposed by Blue Water Baltimore.

TNC commends Senator Sydnor for introducing SB 880, which will lead to the creation of a modern, efficient and equitable water and wastewater system for the residents of Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Therefore, we urge a favorable with amendments report on SB 880.