

Thursday, March 30, 2023

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee; Guy Guzzone, Chair of the Budget & Tax Committee; and Committee Members

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

POSITION: Support SB 923 - Natural Resources - Greenspace Equity Program - Establishment

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 923 offered by Senator Rosapepe. 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.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. SB 923 advances that goal, while prioritizing equity by helping under-funded urban land trusts, community-based nongovernmental organizations, and county and municipal governments to preserve, maintain, and create greenspaces within high-density geographies.

SB 923 seeks to establish a new grant program, the Greenspace Equity Program, which will directly support projects to steward greenspaces in communities across Maryland that have historically been denied investment in and access to these spaces. This grant program will invest in land acquisition, maintenance, and greenspace development projects. It will support a variety of greenspaces, including community gardens and urban farms, parks and trails, woodlands and green networks, and other open gathering spaces. Eligible grant recipients include community land trusts and county and municipal governments. Residents living in urban areas have frequently been sidelined in the decision-making process when it comes to lands in their own community. Abandoned properties have stood vacant for years due to cost barriers to repurposing the land. These grants would enable community leaders and members to access the necessary resources to guide how land parcels within their neighborhoods are used in order to better meet residents' needs.

Air pollutants harm pulmonary and cardiovascular health. Ultrafine sized particulate matter has the ability to penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the circulation system. Nitrogen oxides are major precursors of ground level ozone, which triggers asthma attacks and increases childhood asthma cases. These dangerous health risks disproportionately impact Black and brown communities and low-income neighborhoods. Greenspaces improve local air quality, which can reduce rates of respiratory illnesses. They also reduce the urban heat island effect, thereby decreasing cases of heat-related illnesses and deaths. These spaces provide mental health benefits as well, such as stress recovery and improved mental well-being. Gaining access to greenspaces can significantly benefit community members' physical and mental health and reduce healthcare costs.

Due to high acquisition costs, urban land trusts face financial burdens to conserving greenspace in areas with high population density. The Greenspace Equity Program grants would provide support for urban property acquisition and serve as an invaluable resource to communities for stewarding existing green spaces or creating

greenspace out of previously developed land. Likewise, since the program's funds are flexible and provided directly to local governments and land trusts, the Greenspace Equity Program would provide financial support and decision-making power that will enable communities to create spaces that will improve community health and connectivity.

TNC commends Senator Rosapepe for advancing legislation aimed at advancing urban residents' health, well-being, and influence while also establishing, maintaining, and protecting greenspaces.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 923.