



March 29, 2023

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman  
Chair, Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment  
Maryland State Senate  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Cheryl C. Kagan  
Vice Chair, Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment  
Maryland State Senate  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**RE: HB 503 / SB 923 – Greenspace Equity Program - Favorable**

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee,

**Introduction**

My name is Rachel Toker, and I respectfully submit this testimony on behalf of Urban Ecosystem Restorations (UER), a nonprofit urban land trust working in the down-county suburbs of Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties, where I serve as the President & CEO. UER’s target region is the National Capital Region (or “DMV”), but UER has been most active in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties in the past few years. I am also writing on behalf of myself, as a voting resident of Montgomery County, where I have lived for more than 20 years.

**Support for HB503/SB923**

I am voicing my strong support for, and I urge you to support, Senate Bill 923 (Greenspace Equity Program), as well as the companion bill, House Bill 503. We ask that the Senate conform Senate Bill 923 to House Bill 503 as amended and passed by the House of Delegates.

**Urban Space Needs Greenspace**

Research across all sectors – academia, industry, government, and nonprofit – is showing that high quality greenspace (particularly what UER calls [Eco-Functioning Space](#)) must expand in urban areas if these communities are to remain healthy and thrive into the future. Research is also showing that, as urban areas expand, our natural ecosystems need connected corridors of green infrastructure and habitat to run through these same urban regions in order to remain intact and functioning. See <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/why-connectivity-matters-to-wildlife-and-people>.

## Access to “Nearby Nature” and Human Health

Increasing bodies of evidence are showing that people of all ages need to interact with, and connect to, nature to maintain healthy lifestyles. Numerous stakeholders, including government agencies, environmental nonprofits, landscape architects, educators, public and mental health advocates, and park advocates, have started to study and design programs that use repetitive and frequent human-nature connections to positively affect human health. Hansen et al. (2017) have collected research findings demonstrating nature’s therapeutic effects on: (1) immune system function, (2) cardiovascular system function, (2) respiratory system function, (4) depression and anxiety, and (5) mental relaxation, attentional, and related disorders (including ADHD) (citations below). We are also seeing evidence of the need for people to be near natural green spaces in order to adapt to negative effects of climate change, particularly to manage flooding and urban heat island effects. For example, tree canopy plays a major role in the dissolution or creation of urban heat islands. Trees can help with heat by providing shade and releasing moisture into the atmosphere. Increased tree planting and green space development are major drivers of heat resilience. **A new Montgomery County study shows how heat resilience and urban green space are not equitably distributed and how heat islands map to intensively developed and low-income urban areas.** <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/389babe7ce654fdd87701488ae72e8b6>.

## Urban Nature and Ecosystem Health

Urban nature is also essential for our regional natural ecosystems to remain healthy. See, e.g., <https://hudson.dnr.cals.cornell.edu/conservation-planning/inventory-and-planning/connectivity-planning>. Without connected corridors of habitat and green infrastructure, our isolated parks cannot support our native and migratory species. We must enable large, protected natural areas to connect into integrated ecological frameworks in order to maintain biodiversity and critical mass of native flora and fauna – and this requires greenways through urban areas across the State.

A recent study shows that Maryland’s policies have not yet incorporated this crucial concept from science. It reveals substantial loss of greenspace and tree canopy in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties. See <https://agmr.umd.edu/technical-study-changes-forest-cover-and-tree-canopy-maryland>:

*At regional and county scales, patterns of forest change vary widely, and some concerning trends continue. Counties in central Maryland with rapid development and population growth experienced greater rates of loss, especially loss associated with development. While forest levels as a whole are stabilizing, continued urbanization is fragmenting forests and encouraging spread of invasive species.*

## Greenspace Quality

It is extremely important to recognize that, while the amount of greenspace should be equitably distributed, the quality of that greenspace is as important. Paved open spaces or greenspaces that are bare patches of grass -- or worse, infested with invasive species – are not contributing to the overall health of the regional ecosystem and they are often not contributing to the health of the local community either. Often, invasive species can actually limit access to a greenspace – particularly when dense and thorny. Therefore, funding for restoration and maintenance of

greenspaces (which is very hard to come by) is fundamentally important, particularly for overburdened urban areas that have been neglected and often suffer such infestations.

### Lack of Local Funding Support

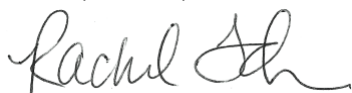
As a land trust working with local communities to partner with nature for their own health and the health of our planet, I see firsthand the funding shortage for these efforts. There are few grant funding sources available to restore, protect, and maintain urban greenspaces – particularly for those that are co-created with these local communities and sit outside of the public parks system. Without grant funds targeted for these purposes (in addition to the limited funding available from stormwater management grants for nature-based solutions), we cannot scale up our efforts. We have lost so many opportunities to protect precious greenspace because of this lack of funding. In fact, UER is working with a landowner in Prince George’s County’s Riverdale Park to create a community nature play space for children in surrounding neighborhoods, but we cannot identify a source of seed funding that would enable us to leverage additional funds so that we can implement the simple design and maintain the space over time.

In fall of 2021, UER, together with a coalition of 17 other community groups working across Montgomery County, called upon the Montgomery County Council to develop targets in its new general plan to increase equitably distributed green infrastructure as a public priority across the County, and to do so in concert with the County’s Climate Action Plan. Yet, Montgomery County chose not to do so, and it continues to be conservative about committing to specific metrics by which it will increase green infrastructure and natural areas in its towns, cities, and urban unincorporated areas. We believe this is in part because of funding concerns. Prince George’s County also has not created robust plans with specific targets for expansion of natural green infrastructure (for purposes beyond stormwater management) across its urban areas either.

### Closing

As we invest in the protection of greenspace statewide, we need to be sure that we are investing in all communities – especially urban and low-income areas. That’s why this bill is so important. The funding support potentially offered by this legislation would provide a major step forward for those of us “on the ground” who seek to increase these essential greenspaces in underserved areas -- in the communities that need it most. I urge you to issue a favorable report on this legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



Rachel Toker  
President & CEO

## Relevant Citations

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- Heat Exposure and Cardiovascular Health: A Summary for Health Departments. (n.d.). 32.
- *Improving Health and Wellness through Access to Nature*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2022, from <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/08/09/18/improving-health-and-wellness-through-access-to-nature>
- *IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions*. (2019, July 18). IUCN. <https://www.iucn.org/theme/ecosystem-management/our-work/iucn-global-standard-nature-based-solutions>
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