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The Maryland House of Delegates
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Testimony of Delegate Dana Stein in Support of

HB 503 - Natural Resources – Greenspace Equity Program - Establishment

Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Environment, Energy, and Education Committee:

I am pleased to sponsor this important legislation, which would work to increase greenspace, including parks, community gardens, urban farms, trail connections and other important greenspace types, in Maryland's underserved and overburdened communities.

Just like our schools, roads, local businesses and other community assets, greenspace is a vital community asset. While Maryland has been a leader in terms of land conservation and protecting places for people and nature, it hasn't been equitable in terms of which communities benefit and how state conservation dollars have been invested. Many Maryland communities were developed without greenspace. Entire communities and neighborhoods have no public outdoor spaces and often lack trees and parks.

This program works somewhat like Maryland's Rural Legacy program, which has conserved over one hundred thousand acres of rural land by providing state funding for proposed projects. Like that program, the Greenspace Equity Program would target state shares of Program Open Space funds to provide state grants to land trusts, local governments, and nonprofits for conservation projects to create new greenspaces in places like the City of Baltimore, Baltimore County, Prince George's County, as well as in southern and western Maryland and Maryland's Eastern Shore. Grants can be used for site development into greenspace, in addition to stewardship of existing greenspaces.

There would be many benefits to this program, primarily:

Public Health. Access to greenspaces has been shown to improve mental as well as physical health. An increasing number of public health studies over the past 25 years have documented various dimensions of the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of people spending time in outdoor spaces.

Think back to 2020 when the pandemic caused our parks and trails to be oversubscribed by residents who had mobility to access them. But many residents in overburdened and underserved communities often lack the mobility to visit these open spaces. We need to provide accessible greenspaces *within* these communities so they also can experience the same health benefits.

Fostering Community. Greenspaces provide residents with a sense of pride and opportunities for community gatherings, outdoor enjoyment, access to nature, and even to grow food. Greenspace can also boost local economies, as parks and community gardens often improve home values.

The grants from this program will be available for land trusts, local governments, and other nonprofits, and 50 percent of the program's annual appropriation is reserved for land conservation projects to ensure that the program is working to create new greenspaces in these communities.

The program's first appropriation will not be until in FY 2025, which gives the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and grant applicants a year to prepare. The funding is scaled up over three years and then stabilizes in the fourth year and thereafter. Funding in the first year will be \$5 million, then \$7 million in FY 2026, and \$10 million in FY 2027 and in each fiscal year thereafter.

The bill establishes criteria that DNR and an advisory board—also created by this legislation—would follow in evaluating annual grant applications. Two of these criteria are a strong showing of support by local residents and organizations, including businesses within the community, and the ability to demonstrate collaboration among land trusts, local governments and nonprofits.

The program created by this legislation will promote projects that create, preserve, and enhance community greenspaces for the many areas of our state that were built up before we understood the benefits of greenspace on public health.

I hope you will support this bill.