

Susan O’Neill, Executive Director
Upper Shore Regional Council
122 North Cross Street
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TESTIMONY ON HB#0695:

Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund – Revisions and Sunset Repeal (Rural Communities Improvement Act of 2023

POSITION: FAVORABLE

TO: Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee

FROM: Susan O’Neill

My name is Susan O’Neill and I am the Executive Director of the Upper Shore Regional Council. I am submitting this testimony supporting HB#0695 which seeks six technical updates to the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF). These updates include the following:

- Removes the 2030 sunset for the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund
- Replaces ‘may’ with ‘shall’ for the Governor to include an appropriation of at least \$1,000,000 to the Rural Maryland Prosperity Fund
- Clarifies that only State recognized rural regional councils are eligible for RMPIF
- Adds Cooperative Development and Workforce Development as focus areas under Rural Entrepreneurship and Agricultural Development
- Updates the hold harmless clause to match what the Council currently receives.
- Includes text that the Executive Committee must concur with any reallocations of grant funds from one fund to the other

The Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund has been crucial in assisting the rural communities within the upper shore of Maryland. Working with Cecil, Kent, and Queen Anne’s Counties, the Upper Shore Regional Council has provided many tools and programming to assist the region. Examples of such programming include giving access to MapDash programming. MapDash puts a multitude of data at their fingertips, visualized to reveal patterns and opportunities. For example: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/af1104a455c4421eab9887b49048ee08?play=true&speed=medium>

Another example of a successful program made possible because of RMPIF is the Upper Shore Agriculture Microgrant program. This program received the MACo 2022 County Innovation Award.

The Upper Shore Agriculture Microgrant Program is a collaborative effort spearheaded by the Upper Shore Regional Council between Cecil, Kent, and Queen Anne's Counties. Now entering its third year, the program has successfully improved our regional food system by creating a cohesive relationship between the upper shore region's economic development offices, farmers, and agricultural enterprises. The Ag microgrant program continues to enhance access to fresh food in our rural communities while opening doors to resource sharing and partnerships throughout the upper shore, ultimately helping to create a vibrant and economically sustainable rural community.

Agriculture and related industries are a key economic development focus in the region, and the grant funding allowed for collaborative outreach and supported agriculture innovation and growth opportunities. This critical grant program provided an avenue to focus on key economic development objectives and several essential community issues within the Upper Eastern Shore. In addition, the program was also successful in improving access to fresh foods in rural areas addressing known food insecurities. Funding also supported several projects focused on sustainable farming practices and innovations that can be shared across the industry.

The Upper Shore Regional Council is respectfully requesting the support of HB #0695.

Thank you.