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The Maryland House of Delegates
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**Delegate Dana Stein Testimony in Support of
HB 631 - Maryland the Beautiful Act**

HB 631 is called the Maryland the Beautiful Act and would advance efforts to protect open space both locally and statewide.

Thanks to our state's strong commitment to conservation, we already have many forests, parks and farms that have been permanently protected.

But there is a growing call to increase conservation efforts so that we provide more space for community enjoyment, protect wildlife habitat and offset the impacts of climate change.

This bill would increase conservation efforts in a few ways.

First, it would set a goal for Maryland to conserve at least 30% of land by 2030 and at least 40% by 2040. Setting a statewide goal is important, because it will provide further guidance and motivation for our ongoing conservation efforts through Program Open Space. We are close to 30% already.

These goals will be achieved only through voluntary conservation – by working together with landowners, communities, tribes, counties, and municipalities to identify lands that will help us preserve places for the benefit of people and nature.

Along with setting goals, the bill includes several provisions to help drive progress toward the goals. In particular, it would help land trusts, which are local and work in communities and regions to preserve forestland and farmland.

Many of these land trusts are very small non-profits with limited resources. They are having a harder time working in a fast-paced, competitive real estate market. Even when a landowner wants to conserve their land, it can be challenging for land trusts to come up with the funds necessary to purchase and conserve the property.

This bill would create a Revolving Loan Fund to provide Maryland's local land trusts another source of capital to use in order to conserve lands across the state. The bill sets up a revolving loan fund that land trusts can apply to access.

Having this source of capital gives land trusts a fighting chance to work with landowners who are interested in conserving their land but can't wait forever.

The bill also helps land trusts with their education and stewardship efforts.

The bill would provide funding to the Maryland Environmental Trust to distribute land stewardship capacity and improvement grants to land trusts across the Maryland, to help them ensure that already conserved lands continue to provide conservation value.

This bill would also help to inspire and educate the next generation about conservation. Grants would support citizen stewardship by other nonprofits, community organizations, schools and municipal corporations to engage people, especially young people, in environmental education and stewardship.

The bill would also create a 40 x 40 "Land Conservation Implementation Grant Program", which will help drive progress toward the statewide goal. Land trusts really need a convening organization that can share best practices, provide trainings, and coordinate the efforts of land trusts across Maryland.

This competitive grant would support a statewide nonprofit organization that is focused on conservation, and empower that organization to provide tools, resources, trainings and conferences to fellow local land trusts.

In short, the bill gives land trusts more resources to conserve and protect open space, for today's generation and all future ones. I urge you to support Maryland the Beautiful and this legislation.