

Wednesday February 1, 2023

TO: Melony Griffith, Chair of the Senate Finance 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 19 Equity in Transportation Sector - Guidelines and Analyses

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 19 offered by Senator Carter. Both the House and the Senate passed this legislation during the 2022 session and we are asking for your continued support this year. SB 19 will provide better representation for our state's transportation system users. It will achieve this by ensuring equity is prioritized in transportation planning, reporting, goal setting and implementation and by increasing community members' influence in the decision-making process.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) announced significant service cuts across the Baltimore region in order to reduce its capital budget. The proposed cuts included reducing available buses and routes that students use to get to schools, as well as eliminating a number of commuter buses, reducing MARC trains, and terminating the only bus route between Baltimore and Annapolis. This would have resulted in restricted access to economic opportunities and necessary goods and services. It would have also placed a greater burden on working parents who need to get their kids to school, or resulted in increased safety risks for students who go to school on their own. These cuts would have also further restricted the already limited access that many Baltimore residents have to the democratic process in our state capitol. TNC joined with local elected officials, community members, and advocacy organizations from both within the Baltimore region and across the state to oppose these inequitable cuts. SB 19 would work to prevent something like this from happening again, as community members be granted significantly increased influence regarding service changes that would significantly impact their everyday lives and access to new opportunities.

When compared to its peer agencies in other states across the nation, the MTA transit system, including subway, light rail, buses, and MARC commuter trains, each rank among the worst for breakdown rates. MTA buses break down approximately twice as frequently as buses in many major Northeast cities. While rectifying these issues would require funding, we also need a more equitable decision-making structure to determine how to address break downs when they occur. Failures in our paratransit services are particularly harmful to riders with disabilities who may not have access to other transportation options. Historic transportation decisions have resulted in highways built through Black communities, lacking transportation options in low-income and red-lined areas, and concentrated health and environmental harms in low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC communities.

In addition to posing a safety risk to transit workers and riders, reliability and connectivity issues restrict access for those riders who depend on our public transit system to commute to job centers, schools, healthcare facilities, childcare, grocery stores, and recreational activities. More than a third of transit riders in Maryland are essential workers. Lack of reliable transportation could put their jobs at risk.

The transportation sector is the largest contributor to climate change in Maryland. It accounts for approximately 40% of greenhouse gas emissions statewide, predominately from on-road sources. Gas-powered vehicles also emit air pollutants like particulate matter that harm pulmonary and cardiovascular health, including triggering asthma attacks. These dangerous health risks disproportionately impact BIPOC communities and low-income

neighborhoods. A safe, reliable, accessible, and well-connected transit system is crucial to promoting public health, equity, and jobs. SB 19 would help Maryland to achieve this by: 1) making equity a primary goal in the Maryland Transportation Plan, 2) requiring annual MDOT reporting on disparities in the transportation system that impact BIPOC and disabled residents, 3) adding representation from the NAACP and a transportation labor organization to the Attainment Advisory Committee, 4) requiring analyses on equity, cost-benefit analysis, and outreach to impacted communities prior to public hearings regarding any major service change, and 5) increasing transparency with annual reporting and service change analysis reporting.

We commend Senator Carter on introducing this bill, which would better ensure our transit workers' and riders' safety, promote equitable access to jobs, schools and other necessities, and protect the health of our citizens.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 19.