

February 20, 2024

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair, Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Climate Adaptation Manager; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support SB 546 Environment – State Wetlands – Shoreline Stabilization Measures

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 546 offered by Senator Elfreth. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

SB 546 prioritizes non-structural or nature-based shoreline stabilization measures by curbing the widespread use of armored shorelines. This bill clarifies existing law as it pertains to waivers for building new armored shorelines and creates a future potential funding source for the implementation of nature-based solutions to protect our shores. The meandering coastline of Maryland touches the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean and spans over 7790 miles. This vibrant coastline is linked to the lives and livelihoods of Marylanders. The Maryland coastline is home to 70% of state's residents (about 4.3 million people based on 2020 census data) who live in 16 coastal counties and the City of Baltimore. In addition to being tied to a rich cultural history, the productive estuarine ecosystems of the Chesapeake Bay and adjoining tidal wetlands are vital habitats for thousands of species of plants and birds combined.

Our state's rich and diverse coastline is under increasing threat from climate change. The 2023 Maryland Sea Level Rise Projections, prepared by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences finds that by 2050, Maryland will experience one to one and half foot of sea level rise measured from a 2000 baseline, this is twice the amount of sea level rise experienced in the previous century. By 2100, the state is expected to experience three feet of sea level rise. Nature based solutions offer the best path forward in Maryland as our state prepares to tackle intensifying climate challenges head on. Nature-based solutions such as vegetated buffers, wetlands, dunes, and reefs etc. offer tremendous benefits that go beyond shoreline protection. Nature based solutions can not only stabilize shorelines, but they are also cheaper to implement than traditional armored solutions. These natural features preserve diverse coastal ecosystems, improve water quality, provide aesthetic and recreational value, and restore the connection of waterfront communities to their coastlines. The combination of these positive impacts contributed to the overall vibrancy of coastal communities and creates more resilient coastlines.

Planning for the various and often uncertain impacts of climate change is a highly local and place-based process that is necessary to identify solutions that can meet the unique needs of each community. We cannot continue to build ever-higher sea walls to combat climate change, and it is important to safeguard the well-being of communities unable to afford the high cost of armored shorelines. Nature based solutions and environmental justice concerns of communities living at the waters edge go hand in hand. By removing permitting exceptions for armored shorelines, SB 546 will mitigate the harm caused by these structures to adjacent low-lying areas that are unarmored and may face increased flooding because of displaced water from armored shorelines next to cities like Annapolis.

We commend Senator Elfreth for introducing the legislation. SB 546 is a step in the right direction and continues to build upon Maryland's legacy of taking bold and proactive action for creating equitable climate solutions for its residents and natural resources.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 546.