



Testimony to the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

SB548 Natural Gas - Strategic Infrastructure Development and Enhancement (Ratepayer Protection Act)

Position: Favorable

2/15/2024

The Honorable Senator Feldman, Chair
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Chair Feldman and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Economic Action Maryland (formerly the Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition) is a people-centered movement to expand economic rights, housing justice, and community reinvestment for working families, low-income communities, and communities of color. Economic Action Maryland provides direct assistance today while passing legislation and regulations to create systemic change in the future.

I am writing today to urge your favorable report on SB528, which reforms the Strategic Infrastructure Development and Enhancement (STRIDE) program and codifies recommendations from the Maryland Commission on Climate Change and the Building Energy Transition Implementation Task Force.¹

Despite requirements for new buildings to reduce reliance on natural gas, Maryland's utility companies continue to develop new and expensive natural gas infrastructure on the consumer's dime. This is due to the multi-billion dollar funding utility companies receive from customers through the STRIDE program. As this committee has worked to establish mandated climate goals, it only makes sense to ensure that policies pre-dating this legislation are updated so that they continue to align with the current climate priorities of our state. Consumers should not be unknowingly funding infrastructure development that is antithetical to Maryland's climate goals, especially when three in four Marylanders support local and state governments taking action against climate change.²

Outside of environmental factors, SB548 would require utility providers to use a "fix it first" approach to faulty gas lines, rather than building costly new infrastructure. SB528 would also end the reckless overspending of consumer dollars by requiring utility providers to prioritize cost effectiveness. Energy companies under STRIDE are currently held to no standards when it comes to spending, which is a problem considering consumers are the main funders of these projects. As STRIDE raises gas bills both in the short term and long, while 18% of Marylanders are burdened by high energy bills,³ it is imperative that these companies are held accountable for prudent spending.

For these reasons, we urge your favorable report on SB528.

Sincerely,
Zoe Gallagher, Policy Associate

¹ <https://pirg.org/maryland/articles/end-the-gas-utility-blank-check/>

² <https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/pressroom/Pages/ClimateChangeishappening.aspx>

³ <https://www.psehealthyenergy.org/over-18-percent-of-maryland-households-are-burdened-by-high-energy-bills/>