

## **SB0548: Natural Gas - Strategic Infrastructure Development and Enhancement (Ratepayer Protection Act) Testimony**

**Hearing Date: February 15, 2024**

**Bill Sponsor: Senator Sydor**

**Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment**

**Submitting:** Liz Feighner

**Position: Favorable**

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and members of the committee, my name is Liz Feighner and as a climate activist, I urge your support of SB0548. I am very concerned about the use of fossil fuels in our homes and businesses and extremely concerned we are not transitioning away from fossil fuels fast enough. We should not be expanding our gas infrastructure and should be only repairing current gas lines where there is a safety issue.

The STRIDE Act of 2013 allows gas utility companies to charge customers a small fee to ensure gas utility safety. Reform is needed because utilities are using the current \$2.00 surcharge to replace all pipes without prioritizing them for safety risk. Our \$2 is just a small fraction of the costs that are locked into charges for decades to come because customers pay for all that spending plus a hefty return, including profits, of about 9% after taxes for the lifetime of the equipment.

**In fact, my neighborhood is only 30 years old** and when I saw utility work being done and inquired about it. I was told that they were replacing the gas line with a larger pipeline, so that we had more capacity to use more gas. I was completely dumbfounded as we shouldn't be increasing gas use. These lines were not being repaired or replaced for safety, they were being replaced just for the sake of increasing capacity costing me and all ratepayers while lining the pockets of BGE's shareholders.

Maryland gas utilities have spent more than two billion dollars on new gas infrastructure under the STRIDE program since 2014 and will spend nearly 10 billion total to complete the program. Utilities are ignoring the state's Climate Solutions Now goals to reach net-zero by 2024, a goal which is only possible if the state moves significantly to building electrification.

As this [Abell Foundation report from December 2023](#) indicates: "... the state's regulated gas suppliers are engaged in a decades-long, state-sanctioned gas infrastructure spending spree that directly contradicts Maryland's legislatively-mandated climate goals and threatens to saddle a dwindling number of ratepayers with billions in costs for decades to come, with the impacts likely disproportionately felt by those least able to afford them."

This bill requires gas utilities to implement new gas leak detection technologies when cost effective, and to apply a "fix it first" approach rather than installing costly new infrastructure. It also requires the utilities to give customers 2 years' notice before the work begins in their community.

SB0548 is a commonsense reform that helps to ensure that ratepayers are receiving cost-effective solutions to gas leak problems while allowing state regulators to monitor gas utility spending more effectively.

I urge passage of SB0548, providing moderate reform to STRIDE, to better align utilities priorities with Maryland's priorities and priorities needed to take action on the climate crisis.

Submitted by Liz Feighner  
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