

Friday, February 16, 2024

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

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support SB 645 Maryland Trails Advisory Committee and the Maryland Office of Trails - Establishment

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 645 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 645 seeks to establish a new Maryland Office of Trails within the Department of Transportation to assist with developing and maintaining the state's vast trails network. Creating the Maryland Trails Network will establish better coordination between the agencies and entities working to maintain, develop and expand Maryland's trails system. The bill also creates a Maryland Trails Advisory Commission, which will have diverse membership from state agencies, various geographies in the state and interested parties, including representatives from cycling and pedestrian groups and disabled communities.

In Maryland, we are fortunate to have so many open and natural spaces from Western Maryland to our coastal communities. Inability to access to these natural areas can be a barrier for Marylanders and prevents spending time outdoors. Gaining access to outdoor spaces can provide significant physical and mental health benefits, such as stress recovery and improved well-being. Enhancing Maryland's trails system can increase access to natural areas, from rural to urban communities, and help to foster an interest in outdoor recreation. By expanding the trail systems that connect people to nature, the Office of Trails will not only support outdoor recreation's growth in the state, but we will see notable co-benefits to our communities, including tangible health benefits from recreation and time spent in nature and more equitable and affordable outdoor mobility across the state.

Outdoor recreation opportunities such as hiking, biking, and trail riding are important access points to nature for many residents, and also to provide substantial economic benefits. Maryland's outdoor recreation economy generates 109,000 direct jobs, \$14 billion in consumer spending, \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries, and \$951 million in state and local tax revenue. By allowing for mixed uses on the trails system, the system's development, growth, and maintenance will also enhance outdoor tourism opportunities. Expanding access to natural places across our state for recreation and conservation can raise Marylander's awareness and appreciation of nature and increases both the cultural and economic value of important places across our state.

TNC commends the Senator Elfreth for introducing this legislation that will invest in access to nature and outdoor recreation across Maryland for current and future generations.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 645.