

HB 538/SB 484

Housing Expansion and Affordability Act of 2024

Testimony by: Tracy Robertson, 414 Bourbon Street Havre de Grace MD 20178

I oppose Senate Bill 484 and House Bill 538 also known as the Housing Expansion and Affordability Act of 2024. I believe this legislation if passed as introduced will diminish the authority of municipal governments, adds unnecessary infrastructure burdens to local communities, strips communities of their ability to be unique, and takes away citizen involvement in local civic processes.

The City Council and administration of the City of Havre de Grace have a track record of providing creative solutions to affordable housing issues in our community. The city has supported the construction of multiple Habitat for Humanity Homes by donating city land and resources. The city has supported affordable housing apartment development on Route 40 as well affordable housing complexes within city limits that support seniors and families in need. Taking the authority out of the hands of the local policy makers gives the impression that we are not agreeable to affordable housing or able to provide workable solutions. In the case of the City of Havre de Grace our policy makers are open to ideas of developmental opportunities that can tackle the affordable housing crisis while also ensuring the needs of our community are addressed.

This bill will allow development to occur in potential areas that are already experiencing infrastructure and support concerns because of over development. My son attends Havre de Grace elementary school that has first and second graders going from outer buildings to a main

building four to five times a day because they do not have enough classroom spaces for the children in the main building. In a time when mass shootings are occurring across our country everyday as a parent, we must already worry about the safety of our children due to overcrowding. Another concern of high-density housing projects being allowed without local oversight is that our roads are already unsafe in some areas due to the volume of traffic. If this bill passes it will allow a potential developer to disregard these concerns if their project fits the outlined criteria. Excluding local city officials who are close to these issues and understand their communities will result in unintended determinantal consequences such as overcrowded schools and unsafe roadways.

Havre de Grace is a unique city that is often referred to as a “Hallmark Movie City” or your “All American City” with its Fourth of July parades, community festivals, and a rich arts & entertainment culture. This city is listed on the National Historical registry for its rich history from its naming by comments made by Lafayette, for almost being chosen as the Nation’s Capitol, and for surviving attack in the War of 1812. The citizens are working to preserve this rich heritage while moving the city forward to meet the needs of a modern city. This takes a delicate balance of insight and forethought that should be left in the hands of the citizens that walk in the footsteps of history makers every day, not by outside developers interested in only meeting a target goal of housing and return on investment. This bill will take a cookie cutter approach to development that can potentially destroy the uniqueness and richness of cities across the state of Maryland.

One of the reasons my husband and I moved to the City of Havre de Grace was it had a small town feel where everyday citizens if they chose to, can be involved in city operations.

Whether it be as an official elected to serve or as a volunteer at one of our many nonprofits, this city offers citizens a voice in their community. This bill will look to diminish that voice. To strip citizens of their rights to evaluate development in their community. This bill would strip their local leaders of authority to look out for the well-being of their citizens by reviewing and having an input in development. If you want citizens to be engaged in the electoral process then you must give them that ability to participate at the levels they are at. Our citizens attend zoning meetings, they have input in safety of our streets, they voice concern over public services in our community. They are active participants in managing their community and holding their leaders accountable. You will no doubt receive several testimonies from concerned citizens throughout this bill process as they do not want their rights taken away by this bill.

I moved to Havre de Grace almost ten years ago. We were attracted to its way of life. We have access to the Susquehanna River, there are walking trails, playgrounds for people and pets, a library, cultural art center and schools all right downtown. We have several art galleries, theatres and boutique shops that cater to the uniqueness of our city. Most importantly we moved here because we found a community that we had a voice and could make a difference. My husband joined the local American Legion and became a city councilman. I have joined our city Youth Commission and few nonprofit boards in my time here. We love our city. We welcome others to our city to be a part of all it has to offer. We only ask that we can continue to be entrusted to be good stewards of our city's infrastructure, uniqueness, and community involvement. This bill will strip the city of its authority to ensure development is done in a way that is congruent to the historical, environmental and functional considerations unique to our City.

