



Maryland

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING

HEARING DATE: February 29, 2024

BILL NO: HB0530

COMMITTEE: Environment and Transportation Committee

POSITION: Letter of Information

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT: Andrew Wilson (443) 366-4224

TITLE: Maryland Trails Advisory Committee and the Maryland Office of Trails - Establishment (Great Maryland Trails Act)

BILL ANALYSIS:

The bill would establish the Maryland Office of Trails (the Office) in MDOT to develop and maintain a designated trail system—the Maryland Trails Network—for transportation, recreational, economic, tourism, and environmental purposes. The bill would set forth the Office’s functions, roles, and responsibilities, which would include: advancing the development, maintenance, and use of trails in the state; developing an inventory and database; and collecting information regarding trails. The bill would require MDP and other state agencies, local governments, and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to work with the Office to identify or establish funding sources for trail development, maintenance and promotion. Also, the Office would be authorized to develop a program to recognize and promote trail towns (communities located close to long-distance non-motorized recreation trails) in the state.

In support of the proposed Office, the bill would create the Maryland Trails Advisory Commission (Commission), which would include the MDP as a member. The Commission would appoint a Director of the Office and provide guidance to state agencies to fund trail programs, develop and implement the Maryland Trails Plan, and support other trails-related policies and regulations. In its current language, the bill would require MDOT to coordinate with MDP and other agencies to provide staff, administrative support, and operating expenses for the Commission in accordance with the state budget.

Lastly, the bill’s current language requires DNR and MDP to transfer employees to the Office as part of the staffing for the Office. The bill indicates that staff for the Office shall have expertise in trail planning and development, mapping and GIS software, and state and local land use and zoning laws and regulations.

MDP provides policy and technical advice on state, regional and local transportation planning and investment decisions to ensure consistency with the Maryland Planning Visions and the Priority Funding Areas Act. The Planning Visions call for growing smarter and more sustainably and making efficient use of State resources through a more collaborative and informed public process. Among them, the transportation vision promotes multimodal transportation that facilitates “the safe, convenient, affordable, and efficient movement of people, goods, and services within and between population and business centers.” Improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities including trails in communities throughout the State will enhance the safety and connectivity of walking, biking, and other active transportation, improve walkability, and foster placemaking in Maryland, which are consistent with the State’s Planning Visions.

In coordination with MDOT, MPOs, local jurisdictions, and other state and federal agencies, MDP is currently involved in the local comprehensive plan and local, state, and regional transportation plan, program, and project planning and development processes, through which MDP advocates for improving Maryland's range of access and mobility options and sound transportation and land use strategies in these plans, programs, and projects. MDP also actively participates in various MPO's and State transportation committees and workgroups including the Maryland Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. Through these intergovernmental coordination efforts, MDP supports the planning and development of pedestrian and bicycle facilities including trails in communities throughout the State and promotes placemaking where walking, biking, and active transportation can be a viable transportation mode.

MDP seeks opportunities to support the development of state plans and planning tools for pedestrian, bicycle, and trail planning and utilizes them to support various planning functions. MDP notes the following existing plans, information and committees related to trail planning and development developed and supported by MDOT:

1. 2050 Maryland Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan
2. Maryland Trails Plan (2009)
3. Maryland State Bicycle Map (2017)
4. Statewide bicycle trail GIS database
5. Maryland's Road-Separated Bike Routes
6. Maryland's Bicycle Level of Traffic Stress Map
7. MDOT Bicycle Accessibility Map
8. Maryland Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee

MDP anticipates it would need to identify additional resources to support the tasks included in the bill. These resources would be needed to support the following MDP work:

1. Implementing trail planning and development activities, in coordination with other state agencies and local governments.
2. Ensuring successful coordination between MDP's regional planning and transportation staff and local planning departments and MPOs.
3. Gathering, organizing, and coordinating the provision of socioeconomic, zoning and land use data and analyses, and mapping needed to support the preparation and promotion of the Maryland Trails Plan and Maryland Trails Network.

Overall, MDP estimates that two replacement staff and one new additional planner will be needed to perform the work required in this bill, without significantly depleting MDP of its transportation planning staff. It should be noted that in the past twenty years, MDP's Baltimore planning office has had over a 40% reduction in staffing, the cumulative impact of this and other planning legislation make it extremely difficult to continue to provide the needed level of planning support and analysis to state agencies and local governments without additional staffing. The fiscal impact to the department to perform the work associated with this bill are estimated to cost \$274,370 in FY 25 and \$330,312 in FY 26.

It should also be noted that MDP, DNR, and MDOT have been in communication with the Offices of Senator Elfreth and Delegate Boyce on this bill, and it is to our understanding that the sections where MDP and DNR are to transfer staff and where MDP, among other agencies, have to share operating expenses were not meant to be in the bill and amendments will be introduced to change that language. Additionally, DNR will be proposing a list of amendments that were shared with MDP ahead of the hearing and that MDP is supportive of, which includes 1) moving the proposed Office of Trails from MDOT to DNR's Office of Outdoor Recreation, and 2) striking the "Maryland Trails Commission" from the bill and shifting its responsibilities to what would be the newly renamed DNR Parks, Recreation, and Trails Commission. If the amendments that the Offices of Senator Elfreth and Delegate Boyce discussed and that DNR are proposing are adopted, then the fiscal impact on MDP will drop significantly.