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**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Environment and Transportation Committee
AFT-Maryland
HB 1509 – Baltimore Regional Water Governance Model Workgroup
March 12, 2024**

FAVORABLE-WITH-AMENDMENTS

Good afternoon Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee. AFT-Maryland is the state organization for a number of public employee unions in Maryland, including the City Union of Baltimore and the Baltimore County Federation of Public Employees. Specifically, we represent both Baltimore City and County workers employed in the water and wastewater utility. We call for a favorable-with-amendments report for HB 1509, the bill that would create a workgroup to study the potential to create a regional water utility for Baltimore City and County.

We have appended the proposed amendments to our written testimony for your review. The amendments address a number of key concerns:

Equitable funding

The water and wastewater system in Baltimore is in dire need of reforms, and this workgroup can help address some of the most serious issues. AFT-Maryland has had members who have been injured in service to the system, and in one unfortunate case, died in an accident at one of the water treatment centers. We believe one of the main drivers of these problems has been inappropriate funding, as the system has not received the funds necessary to prevent these incidents from taking place.

One of the key findings of the task force that studied this issue over the Fall in 2023 was that city water rate payers pay a higher rate to maintain the system than their county counterparts, while consuming water at a lower rate. Not only does this current system starve the water and wastewater utility of vital funds needed to operate the system, but it unfairly pushes the largest burden of system maintenance onto the residents of Baltimore City, those who can afford it the least. The workgroup must address this unsustainable disparity, as well as study how potential changes to the governance of the utility could impact minority communities.

Defend against privatization

We again call on legislation to assure utility privatization to be off the table when considering alternatives to the current governance model. We heard multiple elected leaders last year make

public statements declaring their intent to keep any utility governance model public. Yet last year's taskforce noted that in order to make some suggested changes would require overturning city charter language banning privatization. As a union, we know management promises are nothing until they are put in writing and made enforceable, so again we call on the legislature to prove that privatization is off the table by writing it into the law creating the workgroup.

Protections for workers

We are concerned with the question of retiree pensions and what should happen to those pensions if a new regional utility is created. We are also deeply concerned with what will happen with the current employees of both the city and the county working for the water and wastewater systems. Will they all have to reapply for their jobs? Will seniority rights and pay scales still be applicable? What about their union protections? Will they still be considered employees of the city or county? Or something else entirely? These open-ended questions are vital to recruiting and retaining the most experienced employees who make the system work, and is why we are calling for union representation on the workgroup for both city and county employees in our proposed amendments.

Again, we call for a favorable-with-amendments report on HB 1509. Thank you.