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Christine Simmons Written Testimony at Maryland Senate Finance Committee

SB 647 [CF] HB 828-Abandoned Cemeteries Fund-establishment and Income Tax Checkoff, Feb. 16, 2024

Today I represent the Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites, the state-wide nonprofit dedicated to identifying, protecting, and preserving cemeteries in Maryland. We are enthusiastically in favor of HB828. In my 35 years of researching in Anne Arundel County, I am often asked to help citizens with funding for repairs, professional tree work, and repairing tombstones and fencing. Local individuals or groups may decide to “take on” a cemetery to help preserve it. There is usually an issue involving costs for supplies and professional services needed. This proposed checkoff can be helpful.

Abandoned cemeteries are further burdened with ownership issues. Families die off, move away, caretakers become infirm and can no longer care for the cemeteries, children may not be aware that there is a family cemetery, trees damage fencing and tombstones, and the costs involved are prohibitive to descendants and community groups who are interested in reviving these sites. As time goes on, ownership and deterioration issues become more difficult to resolve. County governments are rarely willing to assume ownership of these cemeteries.

Our Coalition supports this bill because defining “abandoned” is crucial, as is opening this door to meet the challenge of funding. Ultimately there should be creation of a central database of Maryland cemeteries, a speedy method to address burial sites with no known property owner, incentives for all counties and towns to identify sites, notification of descendants prior to disinterment, a requirement for funeral homes and State's Attorneys offices and county Health Departments to maintain relevant records, and increasing penalties for vandals and scoff-laws.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions.

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