



- Washington County Government
- City of Hagerstown
- Town of Williamsport
- Town of Smithsburg
- Hagerstown Community College
- Washington County Free Library
- The Greater Hagerstown Committee, Inc.
- Hagerstown-Washington Co. Chamber of Commerce
- Visit Hagerstown (Local Convention & Visitor's Bureau)
- CHIEF (Hagerstown-Washington Co. Industrial Foundation)

Washington County Community Coalition Lobbyist: John Favazza, Esquire Mannis Canning & Associates 410.263.7882 jfavazza@maniscanning.com

February 27, 2025

The Honorable Guy J. Guzzone
Chairman, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Miller Senate Office Building, 3 West Wing
11 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: SB-0980/HB1327 - Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants

Dear Senator Guzzone,

In 2005, local leaders established the Washington County Community Coalition (WCCC), a dedicated advocacy group with a dual mission. Our first priority is to collaboratively develop an agenda of priority projects and issues that all partners support, then advocate on behalf of Washington County for our agenda in Annapolis. Secondly, we strive to educate state leaders and policymakers about the unique strengths, activities, and “brand” of our community. Our partners include Washington County Government, City of Hagerstown, Hagerstown Community College, Washington County Free Library, the Towns of Williamsport and Smithsburg, Visit Hagerstown, the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, The Washington County Industrial Foundation (CHIEF), and the Greater Hagerstown Committee.

We are writing to express our strong support for Maryland Senate Bill 0980, which seeks to lift the cap on funding for the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA). The Maryland Heritage Area Authority Grant Program provides vital funding to support the preservation of the state's historical, archaeological, natural, and cultural resources. It also fosters economic development through heritage tourism in designated heritage areas. However, over the past three fiscal years, the program has faced a significant funding gap, with an average shortfall of \$8 million between the requested funds and what can be awarded.

Additionally, inflation and the passage of time have diminished the purchasing power of the grants, making it increasingly difficult for organizations to complete their projects effectively. Currently, the program's funding is capped at \$6 million, which is distributed annually to organizations across the state, including Baltimore City and all counties. Given the growing demand for heritage tourism funding, legislation is needed to increase this cap. Specifically, we urge support for the authorization of Program Open Space to transfer funds from \$6 million up to \$12 million annually to the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority Financing Fund.

The economic impact of investing in heritage tourism is undeniable. With increased and targeted funding, we can expand marketing initiatives, enhance visitor services, and develop compelling programs that showcase Maryland's rich and diverse history. This not only fosters local pride but also generates significant revenue, supporting businesses and creating jobs within the tourism sector.

The WCCC fully supports Maryland Senate Bill 0980 and strongly encourages its favorable review and passage. We believe that increasing funding for the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority is a critical step toward preserving our cultural heritage and strengthening the economic vitality of our communities.

Sincerely,

Paul Frey, *Managing Partner for The Washington County Community Coalition*