

## **Testimony on Cemeteries - Requirements for Sale or Transfer or Government Acquisition (HB1354)**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB1354, Cemeteries, Requirements for Sale or Transfer or Government Acquisition.

As a member and supporter of the Bethesda African Cemetery (BACC), I commend the intention of HB1354 to ensure that descendant communities are front and center in discussions and decisions regarding the disposition of vulnerable and abandoned cemeteries. However, the bill unfortunately does not have adequate community protections as the language now stands.

BACC has been fighting the desecration of the historic Moses African Cemetery located in Bethesda, Maryland for many years. The Moses African Cemetery is a special and sacred place for our entire community, as it conveys history that is not taught in schools but is nonetheless essential for understanding the inequities that persist throughout Maryland today.

If BACC had not taken our case to court, the Moses Cemetery may have been lost forever with residential and commercial development built on top of buried loved ones. That is why we believe that the Director of Cemeteries must not have the last word, as the bill currently allows: we have seen first-hand that there is no guarantee of justice in empowering an unelected agency with final decision-making power.

It is our understanding that Delegate Simmons supports an amendment to his bill that would mandate court consideration of a sale of a cemetery or a disposition of an abandoned cemetery when a descendant community believes that the Director of Cemeteries has rendered an inequitable decision regarding a disposition of a cemetery. This amendment must become part of this bill in order to secure the support of the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition (BACC).

Thank you so much for your consideration,

Pamela Ehrenberg

BACC member