



SIERRA CLUB

MARYLAND CHAPTER

P.O. Box 278
Riverdale, MD 20738

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Testimony on: SB 978 – Environmental Permits – Requirements for Public Participation and Impact and Burden Analyses (Cumulative Harms to Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health – CHERISH Our Communities Act)

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 25, 2025

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on the CHERISH Our Communities Act, SB 978. This bill will require meaningful community engagement and public notice for all major pollution permits and help avoid or mitigate impacts on already overburdened communities. Importantly, Maryland Department of the Environment would have authority to consider cumulative impacts and environmental justice in permitting decisions and to take or require actions to address them where already overburdened communities would be impacted. Existing procedures have left overburdened communities across the state to have to endure an increasingly polluted environment and associated adverse health impacts. The measures outlined in the CHERISH Our Communities Act are needed to ensure that communities near polluting facilities or clusters of them are also able to experience clean air and water and a healthful environment.

Maryland's current system for issuing permits does not reflect the reality of how polluting facilities have been sited over decades. Polluting facilities have not been built in isolation, but rather they are often clustered and sited near vulnerable or already overburdened communities. As such, the CHERISH Act amends the permit process to align with actual conditions.

The Act also requires meaningful community engagement and public notice for all major pollution permits, giving Maryland residents the ability to be informed about the impacts that polluters have on the environment and become more engaged in the permitting process.

For those who don't know what it is like to live near a polluting facility, imagine living downwind of an incinerator and it smelling like burnt toast for hours whenever the incinerator is on most days of the week. That acrid smell permeates all the air outside and also the air inside the apartment. Imagine having health problems from it and not knowing why. Imagine your child having asthma from polluted air in your community but you can't afford to move. This is just a window into pollution's effects from actual personal experience. There are communities in Maryland that are near multiple sources of pollution, and their difficulties are magnified.

In recognition of how polluting facilities have and continue to be sited near already overburdened communities, states including New Jersey, New York, and Minnesota have already passed and are implementing legislation similar to the CHERISH Our Communities Act.

Given the critical importance of protecting residents of overburdened communities across the state, the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on SB 978, the CHERISH Our Communities Act.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.