



**HoCoClimateAction.org**  
Howard County, Maryland

**SB0978: Requirements for Public Participation and Impact and Burden Analyses  
(Cumulative Harms to Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health -  
CHERISH Our Communities Act)**

**Hearing Date:** February 25, 2025

**Bill Sponsor:** Senator Lam

**Committee:** Education, Energy, and the Environment

**Submitting:** Liz Feighner for **HoCo Climate Action**

**Position:** **Favorable**

[HoCo Climate Action](#) is a [350.org](#) local chapter and a grassroots organization representing approximately 1,400 subscribers. It is also a member of the [Climate Justice Wing](#) of the [Maryland Legislative Coalition](#).

Howard County Climate Action **supports SB0978, the CHERISH Our Communities Act** and we urge you to pass SB0978 which will address the disproportionate environmental and public health harms that environmental justice communities in Maryland face from pollution generating facilities. Currently, when a new permit to pollute is considered, Maryland only evaluates how that permit will impact a community, instead of evaluating the cumulative impacts with other sources of pollution already allowed.

For centuries, these polluting facilities have been disproportionately and deliberately sited in minority and economically distressed communities in Maryland. Low-wealth, Black, and other communities of color in Maryland [face greater cancer risks and exposure to air toxics](#) due to higher pollution burden. Maryland lacks the legal authority to make permitting decisions based on environmental justice data. The bill amends Maryland's environmental law to provide adequate environmental impact assessment and opportunities for public participation for new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits that are issued by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE).

SB0978 specifically covers communities in and immediately around census tracts with an environmental justice score of 75 or above, according to the MDE's EJ Screening Tool. A higher score indicates communities with higher exposure to pollutants combined with sensitive populations and underserved demographics. This bill requires MDE to consider whether the project will increase the pollution burden on the surrounding community as part of their review process and will give MDE the legal authority to deny the permit.

The permit reform provided by the CHERISH Act implements a fairer system where community voices are taken into account in decisions that affect their health and well-being. It will ensure that communities already dealing with pollution burdens aren't forced to accept more without safeguards and benefits.

We urge a **favorable report for SB0978**.

Howard County Climate Action  
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