



## Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

### Testimony in Support of SB 978 - CHERISH Our Communities Act

TO: Chair Feldman and the members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
FROM: Phil Webster, PhD, Lead Advocate on Climate Change  
Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland.  
DATE: February 25, 2025

The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland (UULM-MD) strongly supports **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)**

The UULM-MD is a faith-based advocacy organization based on Unitarian Universalist (UU) Values, including Interdependence (honoring the interdependent web of all existence) and Justice (where all feel welcome and can thrive). Working to mitigate, adapt to, and build resilience for climate change is central to our beliefs.

The CHERISH our Communities Act has been around for ten years, in one form or another. Originally introduced in 2014, it is based on a simple premise: enough (pollution) is enough. The bill would *"require adequate environmental impact assessments for new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits to ensure that environmental justice (EJ) communities do not continue to disproportionately bear the harms of environmental and public health hazards."*

In 2022, "overburdened" and "underserved" communities were officially defined in Maryland law, targeting areas hit hardest by environmental and economic challenges. Also in 2022, "Justice 40 language" was included in the Joint Chairmen's Report (JCR) from the legislative budget committees to request information from Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) on recommendations to identify and provide assistance to overburdened communities, legislative & regulatory changes to direct at least 40% of funding from critical programs to community needs. The Maryland EJ Screening tool has been developed to identify census tracts with high Environmental Justice scores.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act builds on this foundation by giving the MDE the *authority* to use the "EJ Score" when evaluating new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits.

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While the current Federal Administration is abandoning overburdened and underserved communities, Maryland must not do the same. The Administration has rescinded two of President Biden's Executive Orders that "explicitly take environmental justice into account when spending funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or the Inflation Reduction Act."

Failure to pass this legislation would be unconscionable. Our neighbors in communities—such as Curtis Bay and Brandywine—are crying out for us to act. The time for action is NOW.

We urge a FAVORABLE report on **SB 978**.

*Phil Webster, PhD*

Lead Advocate, Climate Change UULM-MD

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