



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

February 25, 2025

SB978

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

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of **Senate Bill 978**. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act strengthens public participation requirements for environmental permits in areas facing significant environmental and public health burdens. This legislation mandates that permit applicants for projects with a high potential for adverse community impacts conduct environmental impact analyses and existing burden reports. The Department of the Environment will assess whether a proposed project may contribute to environmental harm and has the authority to deny permits when necessary. Additionally, enforcement information will be made publicly accessible, and a portion of revenues from enforcement actions will be allocated to a special fund aimed at addressing environmental disparities.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical "Laudato Si'," calls upon all people of goodwill to recognize the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and economic concerns and to work together towards the common good. **Senate Bill 978** upholds the principles of stewardship of creation, human dignity, and the common good. Communities disproportionately burdened by environmental pollution, particularly low-income and minority populations, suffer from unjust exposure to hazardous conditions. The CHERISH Act prioritizes environmental justice, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status, have a right to clean air, water, and a healthy living environment.

By taking an analysis of projects with a high potential for adverse community impacts it has a profound implication for public health, economic opportunity, and environmental justice. By requiring public participation and impact assessments, the bill embodies the principle of subsidiarity, empowering local communities to have a say in decisions affecting their health and environment. This bill is an essential step toward ensuring environmental justice and human dignity, reinforcing Maryland's commitment to protecting both people and creation from the

long-term consequences of unchecked industrial development. Let's be a state that takes into consideration all communities, especially in areas of development and growth.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference urges a favorable report on **Senate Bill 978**.