

SB399 Natural Resources - Wildland Areas - Overhead Transmission Lines

Education, Energy, and the Environment
February 7, 2025

UNFAVORABLE

Testimony of Private Citizen

The submission of SB 399, involving overhead transmission lines across protected state forests, is premature. There has been no public engagement, and the handling of the bill seems to have been rushed through the submission process in a way that would make public questions or input nearly impossible.

At the Garrett County Commissioners' meeting on February 3, the Chair, Paul Edwards announced that Senator McKay would be submitting SB 399 the next morning. He said the Garrett Commissioners had no notice, and the commissioners themselves did not have enough information to form an opinion on it. He said that they had not even seen a map of the possible routes at that point. This is the first anyone locally had heard about the bill.

When I wrote Senator McKay (who submitted the bill) to express my feelings about the lack of public engagement, he replied that the public would have an opportunity to share their views during the legislative process. I believe that will be too late for the public to be fully informed. Mr. McKay also seemed to imply that neither the citizens of Garrett County, nor our elected officials needed to be consulted on a bill concerning Maryland State Wildlands in our county.

I disagree.

This bill is proposing to grant perpetual right-of-way to a commercial enterprise for arguably some of the state's most sensitive wilderness. This move will certainly affect abutting Garrett County residents and farmers especially when it comes to their property, property value, and possibly their health. And yet, local people and their elected officials were not given more than a couple of days' notice and were given no chance for input at this phase.

The bill does more than "simply allow[ing] the state the flexibility to consider this route," as Mr. McKay replied to me. It, in fact, removes one hurdle in a strategy to get this done with the least amount of public engagement possible. Simply put, local folks haven't been informed about any details of the plan, and even though he said that the details are not available, it's because they have not been MADE available. We, Garrett County residents and residents of Maryland, deserve to have numerous questions answered before this is considered by the General Assembly. We, as citizens (and therefore the true owners) of this state property, deserve to weigh in on the outcome before the Assembly causes it to be too late.

Since anything that enters public land will certainly have to exit on private land, we want the opportunity to ask questions about alternatives, like using the same right-of-way that is currently in use, or replacing old transmission lines with the more conductive materials we have all been hearing about. We have seen no research, no maps, no pros and cons to alternatives, and we want to weigh in on the project's impact on our properties, our neighbors' farms, not to mention the sensitive wilderness this would trample.

It is for these reasons that I submit to you that the bill has not had adequate consideration by the public to go beyond the committee. I suggest that it be taken up at such a time that it can be fully researched and discussed by those affected, and that those supporting the bill work transparently with Garrett County people and officials to that end.

I am therefore requesting that the committee return an unfavorable decision.

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