



NATIONAL AQUARIUM®

Date: February 25, 2025

Bill: SB 978 - Environmental Permits - Requirements for Public Participation and Impact and Burden Analyses (CHERISH Our Communities Act)

Position: Support

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee:

The National Aquarium respectfully requests a favorable report for SB 978 - Environmental Permits - Requirements for Public Participation and Impact and Burden Analyses (CHERISH Our Communities Act). This legislation would change the way the Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) evaluates permits for facilities that emit pollution by requiring public notice, meaningful community engagement, community benefits agreements, and impact reduction measures for all major pollution permits. This bill would also allow MDE to consider environmental justice and cumulative impacts of pollution when making permitting decisions.

The National Aquarium connects people with nature to inspire compassion and care for our ocean planet. Our three overarching strategic goals to combat climate change, stop plastic pollution, and save wildlife and habitats are guided by principles of equity and environmental justice. For more than a decade, the National Aquarium has collaborated with neighbors from Baltimore's Brooklyn and Curtis Bay communities and other partners through the Masonville Cove Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership, restoring access to and offering year-round educational programming on over 100 acres of remediated land and water. Masonville Cove is adjacent to several communities of Baltimore residents who historically and presently bear a disproportionate share of the impacts of industrial pollution.

In Baltimore and beyond, industrial facilities are often concentrated in or near communities of color and economically distressed areas, and people living there inequitably experience cumulative impacts of pollution from those facilities. For instance, residents of South Baltimore are harmed by pollution from a variety of concrete and asphalt plants, trash and medical waste incineration, petroleum and coal terminals, landfills, and other polluting facilities. This bill incorporates priorities and expertise from people living in affected communities and fills a gap in MDE's current permitting authority to protect public health. Including input from residents who live where permits are being considered is long overdue and this bill will enable adequate environmental impact assessment and opportunities for public participation for new, renewed, and expanded environmental permits.

The current process for evaluating polluting facilities is outdated and allows environmental harm to compound in already overburdened and underserved communities. This legislation, like bills enacted in New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota, will ensure sources of pollution are not evaluated in a vacuum. Accounting for cumulative impacts in permitting decisions and setting strict guidelines for community engagement for new sources of pollution deepens the state's commitment to environmental justice, public health, and the well-being of all Marylanders.

We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 978.

Contact:

Ryan Fredriksson

Vice President, Government Affairs

410-385-8276

rfredriksson@aqua.org

Maggie Ostdahl

Sr. Conservation Policy Manager

410-385-8275

mostdahl@aqua.org