



SB0998 - SUPPORT
Frances Stewart, MD
Elders Climate Action Maryland
frances.stewart6@gmail.com
301-718-0446

SB0998, the Ratepayer Protection Act

Meeting of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

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Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

Thank you for allowing our testimony today in support of SB0998, the Ratepayer Protection Act. Elders Climate Action is a nationwide organization devoted to ensuring that our children, grandchildren, and future generations have a world in which they can thrive. The Maryland Chapter has members across the state.

On behalf of Elders Climate Action Maryland, I urge a favorable report on SB0998. The bill SB0998 amends, the current Strategic Infrastructure Development and Enhancement Plan (STRIDE) law, was passed in 2013 to allow gas utilities to add a surcharge to customers' monthly bills to ensure accelerated cost recovery for a safe gas system. It was intended to prioritize safety and cost-effectiveness. More than a decade of experience has shown that gas utilities prioritize investment in gas system expansion and replacement, and the associated profits, over fixing the riskiest pipes.

Gas utilities make their highest profits off of capital investments, including installing new pipes and equipment like external regulators. Increased capital spending increases customers rates and is reflected in ratepayer delivery costs. STRIDE increases the incentive to overinvest - driving up our rates and utility profits, but without measurably improving utility service.

For example, BGE delivery rates have nearly tripled since 2010, allowing their profits to jump from \$147 million in 2010 to \$485 million in 2023. While gas utilities may try to blame increased rates on the EmPOWER surcharges, this is misleading.

Currently, the fixed delivery charge for BGE is \$14.24/therm and the EmPOWER surcharge is only \$.047/therm. In addition, the recent EmPOWER increase is a short-term fix as the unamortized balance of EmPOWER debt will be paid off in 2026, and ratepayers will actually save money in future years.

Rising energy costs are a serious problem for low-income households and people with fixed incomes, many of whom are elders. In 2023, approximately [400,000 Maryland households](#) were paying more than six percent of their income for energy bills, and those numbers are increasing.

Gas utility spending and rate hikes have not translated to greater safety. The Maryland Office of the People's Counsel found that since 2014, gas utilities have spent more than two billion dollars under the STRIDE law on new gas infrastructure, and will spend a total of nearly 10 billion to complete the program. According to federal data, BGE's hazardous leaks per year have increased in the last decade, escalating from 2,400 in 2011 to over 4,000 in 2023. Columbia Gas has followed a similar trajectory of increased spending, profits and rates, and without intervention, Washington Gas will likely follow suit.

Maryland ratepayers are on the hook to cover these costs, as well as additional return on investment profits for utilities, amounting to \$40 billion over the life of the program.

SB0998 puts safeguards in place that require utilities to prioritize safety and cost effectiveness over capital expenditure profits. These safeguards include:

- requiring gas utilities to use modern leak detection technology to identify aging pipes with the greatest risk of failure
- requiring gas utilities to use less costly alternatives than replacement where appropriate,
- requiring 2 years notice to gas customers before work in their home begins so they have time to plan and to consider electrification
- ensuring gas infrastructure spending is cost effective.

SB0998 is a consumer protection and safety bill aimed at curbing escalating burdensome costs imposed on ratepayers by monopoly utilities. Elders Climate Action Maryland sees SB0998 as a small but badly needed change to the STRIDE program to remedy unintended consequences. We strongly urge a FAVORABLE report in Committee.