

Testimony Supporting SB0978
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 25, 2025

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

As a resident of Baltimore City and a member of the South Baltimore Community Land Trust, a grassroots nonprofit. We are writing to express my strong support of SB978, the CHERISH Our Communities Act. As a community member who has personally experienced the harmful effects of pollution, I have seen firsthand the urgent need for a bill like this.

For years, my community and communities across Maryland have been burdened with toxic air, water, and land pollution. These environmental hazards are not just numbers on a report; they translate to higher rates of asthma, cardiovascular disease, and other serious health issues—disproportionately affecting low-income communities and communities of color. The CHERISH Our Communities Act takes a necessary step toward addressing this environmental injustice by ensuring that polluters can no longer operate unchecked at the expense of public health.

By using the Maryland EJ Screening Tool to identify the 25% most polluted communities, this bill provides a targeted and data-driven approach to environmental justice. It mandates that when polluting entities seek permits, they must submit an Environmental Impact Statement and an Existing Burden Report. This requirement ensures that the true cost of pollution—on both people and the environment—is properly evaluated before any new or expanded operations are approved.

Additionally, the bill holds polluting companies accountable by allowing the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) to deny permits that would increase adverse impacts on vulnerable communities. For renewal permits, the requirement of additional permit conditions and a Cumulative Impacts Mitigation Fund Agreement ensures that ongoing pollution burdens are addressed rather than ignored.

Another critical component of this legislation is transparency and enforcement. Making enforcement actions easily accessible online and directing 25% of penalties from violations back into impacted communities ensures that those who suffer the most from pollution receive tangible support. For too long, our communities have been left to bear the consequences of environmental degradation without adequate protections. The CHERISH Our Communities Act fills a long-standing gap in MDE's permitting authority and provides a framework to safeguard public health where it is needed most.

I urge you to stand with community members like myself who need this protection and pass the CHERISH Our Communities Act. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Carlos Sanchez-Gonzalez
The South Baltimore Community Land Trust