



Saving the Chesapeake's Great Rivers and Special Places

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Date: February 10, 2025
Bill Number: **HB 717 - Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding**
Committee: House Environment and Transportation Committee
Position: Support with Amendments

Chairman Korman and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

Chesapeake Conservancy supports an *amended* **HB 717 - Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding**, for the purpose of allowing the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to thoughtfully and more strategically address staffing and land acquisition.

This bill makes minor changes to current ethics laws as they affect the Department and directors or officials within an affiliated foundation under the Department's purview. Within the Natural Resources article, this bill defines "real property interest" – meaning a non-leasehold interest in real property and includes a fee simple acquisition interest, conservation easement interest, or another perpetual easement interest. Additionally, this bill establishes that a "Land and Property Management Program" exists within DNR, and that it is responsible for "processing lease agreements, easements, and other property-related documents" as well as issuing leases for housing Department employees.

The Department may allow affiliated foundations to work with associated organizations within the Department for the purposes of enhancing equitable use of, and access to, lands managed by the Department for: recreation and conservation; restoring or maintaining public access to natural resources; or towards ongoing operation and maintenance activities within lands managed by the Department.

Lastly, this bill allows for Program Open Space stateside funds, in excess of \$80M at the end of a fiscal year, to be able to be transferred to the existing *Forest or Park Reserve Fund*. While Chesapeake Conservancy supports the intent of this provision, we feel that if a funding cap should exist, the proposed \$80M cap is too low. Furthermore, any amount over a cap, shall be redistributed through current conservation programs.

As noted in Section 5-903 (pages 14 and 15), we suggest that:

- **any additional Program Open Space stateside fund balance, in excess of \$100,000,000, be allowed to be redistributed through the current transfer tax formula** and towards the state's other vital land conservation programs.

For further information, please contact Mark Conway at (443) 321-3610 or MConway@ChesapeakeConservancy.org.

We greatly appreciate your consideration and thank you for your service.

Sincerely,

Mark Conway
Executive Vice President, Chesapeake Conservancy