



## Senate Bill 976

### *Collective Bargaining - Local Government Employees and Public Employee Relations Act*

MACo Position: **OPPOSE**

To: Finance Committee

Date: February 27, 2025

From: Karrington Anderson

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **OPPOSES** SB 976. This bill mandates collective bargaining rights for local government employees statewide, imposing binding arbitration requirements, and significantly altering local government labor relations. SB 976 represents an unfunded mandate that would force counties to divert resources from essential public services, undermining fiscal responsibility, operational flexibility, and local control.

Currently, counties manage labor relations through locally determined policies that reflect the unique needs of their workforce and financial constraints. SB 976 removes this discretion by requiring all counties, large and small, to engage through a State-mandated collective bargaining, under a one-size-fits-all state framework, with no exceptions. Moreover, the bill mandates binding arbitration, transferring critical budgetary and personnel decisions to third-party arbitrators who may be unfamiliar with local fiscal realities, and do not share the public accountability of local elected officials. The financial impact of SB 976 on counties would be substantial and unsustainable. Without dedicated state or federal funding, counties will be forced to absorb significant costs associated with labor negotiations, arbitration, and contract implementation.

The unpredictability of arbitration decisions could force counties to either increase taxes or cut critical public services such as education, emergency response, and infrastructure to accommodate costly labor agreements. SB 976 would impose bureaucratic delays and limit workforce flexibility, reducing the ability of county governments to manage their employees efficiently. The inclusion of binding arbitration as the final decision-making mechanism removes incentives for collaborative negotiations and could lead to protracted disputes. Additionally, provisions allowing public employees to strike pose a significant risk to essential public services, particularly public safety and emergency response operations.

Many counties already have collective bargaining structures in place that have been developed through decades of negotiation. This bill fails to account for these long-standing agreements, potentially nullifying the ability to continue with locally negotiated contracts and forcing counties into an unfamiliar and more adversarial bargaining system. Under SB 976, counties who have enjoyed a

smoothly-functioning relationship and process with their employee bargaining units would have those structures overhauled, to comply with this new, narrow vision for one particular style of bargaining.

MACo supports fair and competitive employment policies, which Maryland jurisdictions have pursued through the years both locally and through State-level authorizing legislation. SB 976 represents an overreach of State authority, and a rigid and unwelcome unfunded mandate that could have serious financial and operational consequences for local governments. MACo urges an **UNFAVORABLE** report on SB 976.