



Senate Finance Committee Hearing on SB631 Hearing Date: February 20, 2025

CPMBS position: FAV

Establish Maryland Abandoned & Neglected Cemeteries Commission

The Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites was organized in 1992 by Marylanders distressed by the weak protections for cemeteries existing in the Maryland Code. Some protective legislation has been enacted in past decades, and now it is time to strengthen State laws and procedures. Current State law is insufficient and infrequently enforced at local levels to protect cemeteries from desecration, vandalism, neglect, and exploitation. Stronger State laws and uniform procedures, better documentation, public awareness, widespread information, and guidance are sorely needed.

Several of the initiatives filed this session were called out in a 2022 report to the Joint Chairmen on Historic African American Cemeteries in Maryland. This survey and study with recommendations provides templates for improving the situations of all cemeteries, with emphasis on sites where ownership is unknown and the site is abandoned, on creating a complete inventory of all known Maryland cemeteries, and on improving current law where experience shows it cannot protect descendants nor the physical sites.

https://africanamerican.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/07/2022-Historic-African-American-Cemeteries-JCR-Report_small.pdf

Sadly, as we all know, African American cemeteries are over-represented in the numbers of abandoned and unmaintained sites today, for a variety of reasons. The church may have disbanded, the congregation aged out or moved away and the cemetery neglected. Records were lost and corporate requirements were unattended to. Families sold their farms, and developers did not honor the little enclosures on the hill. Historically, many have been dismissed as less important or intentionally mistreated.

SB 631 fits neatly with SB 963. Together they define the problems and sort out the basics. All Maryland jurisdictions have sites within their borders that are abandoned or neglected. One of the most common issues is unknown ownership. Without proven, recorded ownership, it is impossible to take steps to resolve problems or to even organize a clean-up, be officially recognized, apply for a grant.

The Commission will conduct research on the experiences of other states. It will establish standard definitions, needed to dispel confusion in sections of Maryland law. It will address priorities that have long been identified in every Maryland county and municipality. This will help descendants, communities, landowners, and local governments to begin resolving issues. Creating a Commission and a dedicated fund will set the stage for understanding, defining, and envisioning a future for these needy sites and those who care about them.

Thank you for your consideration,
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