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February 20, 2026

The Honorable Guy Guzzone
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
3 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Senate Bill 638 - Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants
(Favorable Testimony)

Dear Chair Guzzone:

I am writing to express my support for Senate Bill 638. Although I have served as Executive Director of the Chesapeake Crossroads Heritage Area for just a year, my nearly three decades working in historic preservation for local government allowed me to see firsthand the real-world benefits of this program. I hope to demonstrate why lifting the statutory cap now will ensure that, when fiscal conditions improve, the program can continue building on its compelling record of success. Through its 13 certified heritage areas, the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) has invested in tourism, community revitalization, museum development, historic preservation, and educational programming with tangible local outcomes for nearly three decades, while demonstrating responsible stewardship of public investment.

What is unique about this program, by its very placement under DNR's Program Open Space umbrella, is that we, as heritage areas, help activate the very lands that POS funds help protect and preserve. To spend money just preserving land for the sake of preservation is worthwhile, but when citizens can further appreciate, experience, recreate and learn about our collective history from those lands, State POS dollars are even further enhanced and more fully benefit all Marylanders. I also note that MHAA grant funding is regularly awarded to preserve or make accessible State DNR lands and historic sites. The network of this program within DNRs POS should not be seen "in competition" but rather as part of a sophisticated and symbiotic relationship of responsible and forward-thinking land conservation and management.

Since its inception, the program has awarded more than \$74 million in grants, generating over \$175 million in matching funds — a powerful multiplier that strengthens local economies while preserving Maryland's heritage. In fiscal year 2025 alone, MHAA awarded 88 grants totaling \$5.2 million, leveraging more than \$20 million in non-state matching support and reaching communities across all 23 counties and Baltimore City.

The program has helped develop and make accessible iconic regional sites such as Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, the Museum of Historic Annapolis, Historic Londontown & Gardens, and the Annapolis Maritime Museum. MHAA support has been critical in recent years bringing about a renaissance of Carrs Beach in partnership with Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation, the return of historic skipjacks racing on the western shore through the Skipjack Foundation, and support for a feasibility study to bring back into service the Queenstown Rosenwald School as a community center

and archive by the Severn Improvement Association. Equally important, it supports dozens of smaller and lesser-known historic sites and heritage attractions. Many of these are grassroots, community-driven nonprofits — more than sixty within Chesapeake Crossroads alone — that rely on this support to grow, strengthen organizational capacity, and become places where Maryland’s story can be shared and embraced.

The Maryland Heritage Areas Program funding level is currently capped by regulation at \$6 million. This funding has delivered strong returns, with more than \$5.1 million flowing directly back into Maryland communities each year to support preservation projects, partnerships, historic sites, museums, recreational trails, cultural events, and local conservation and revitalization work. I ask for your support of this bill to ensure the program's long-term success. The economic and community benefits generated by the Heritage Areas Program could be constrained in the coming years if the statutory funding cap is not lifted.

The need is real: In 2025, only about 30 percent of grant requests within my heritage area received funding, despite well-developed, impactful projects that could have leveraged additional community investment and delivered direct tourism benefits to our region. This year, from my heritage area alone, we have 30 organizations requesting more than 1.2 million dollars. The other 12 heritage areas see similar demand- which is why the \$6 million cap is clearly a barrier to building on the success we know these partners can bring forward. This bill is a prudent step to position the MHAA program for long-term vitality while acknowledging today’s fiscal realities. It simply removes an outdated statutory cap, allowing the program to grow with the times if and when resources are available.

Of critical importance is that the legislation carries no fiscal mandate. As per the fiscal note, this bill only AUTHORIZES such an increase but it remains in the hands of the Governor's annual budgetary process to decide if this program is beneficial enough to the State to warrant further support. I believe wholeheartedly that the programs' economic, and cultural benefits are worthy, but this bill merely gives the flexibility in future years to make that decision at a future date. Passing this bill now will not carry a mandate to increase funding- only the authorization to do so under code. Its language is intentionally permissive — using “may” and “up to” rather than “shall” — reflecting awareness of constraints on both the General Fund and Program Open Space funds. It is a necessary legislative adjustment that allows for responsible future growth.

In short, this program works and makes Maryland a better place to live, work, play, and visit. It leverages funding, strengthens local economies, preserves irreplaceable resources, and helps residents and visitors connect with the land and with the past in ways that inspire civic pride and future investment. I respectfully urge a favorable report on this bill and continued support for the Maryland Heritage Areas Program.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



C. Jane Cox
Executive Director,
Chesapeake Crossroads Heritage Area