

## Testimony in favor of Senate bill 318 (Resident Sheldon Smith)

Thank you for allowing me to speak today on behalf of Senate bill 318. My name is Sheldon Smith. I'm an attorney and I reside in Catonsville MD.

I strongly support the proposed legislation under Senate bill 318. This bill requires a public engagement plan and community outreach activities for certain State projects, as defined in the legislation. I strongly support this legislation.

Some background. I'm involved in a community's effort to change the location of a proposed 348 ft radio tower that is proposed for installation in Catonsville by the State agency, Maryland IT department. This project is in Senator Brooks' Legislative District, and I believe was the impetus for the proposed legislation.

The Maryland State IT department has proposed installing a 348 ft radio tower in Catonsville on Hilton Ave, near the Patapsco State Park to provide radio coverage to the Patapsco River valley for public safety. Estimated project value is \$3M to 3.5M. While we have no objection to establishing better radio coverage in the river valley, we do object to the Maryland IT department's decision to place the tower so close to numerous residential areas. This massive 348 foot (equivalent to a 30 stories high building) will be a permanent eyesore that will damage the residential character of the surrounding communities. The river area to be covered is 90% non-residential, yet the Maryland IT Department instead chose a residential area for the tower location, and we believe there are other locations that would have less community impact.

Our efforts to find another location for this tower continue, however I'm not here to talk about the actual tower location issue, but rather to discuss the community engagement process (or lack thereof) that was followed for this Tower project, as follows:

1) There were no public hearings or public notifications about the proposed tower at the onset of the project. Community members only found out about the project through Public Information Act (PIA) requests for documentation. **Point #1: the public should not be required to DISCOVER a State project, rather the State should have the responsibility to notify the community about major projects that affect their community The proposed legislation now establishes a requirement for such community engagement and outreach.**

2) Once we obtained the PIA documents, we were able to begin email discussions with the State's IT department. In these email exchanges the IT department provided the following statements: "community meetings for these types of projects are typically scheduled near the completion of the engineering phase.", and another statement provided: "local county zoning appeal processes do not apply" (which also means that local county public notifications requirements do not apply). This is the crux of the issue. The State IT department (and I believe

other State agencies) believe that they are not required to engage the public at the beginning of these types of projects.

**The proposed legislation corrects this interpretation and now specifically requires a public engagement plan and community outreach activities for these types of projects.**

3) The initial approval of the project was May 2022, yet the first public meeting was not held until July 24, 2025, some 38 months into the project. By that time, the site had been selected, inter-department agreements between IT and DNR were completed, an archeological study was complete, a contractor was selected, and detailed blueprint drawings of the tower at that location were created. Basically the project was “cooked” so there was little ability to address changes or the community’s concerns. At the July 24, 2025, and the subsequent November 6, 2025 public meetings, the IT Department took a defensive position, that basically defended their decisions and closed off discussion about changes or concerns.

**Public engagement for these types of projects should occur much earlier in the process, so that the public is informed and their feedback and objections can be heard. The proposed legislation now establishes a public engagement plan and community outreach activities process.**

4) I believe that Government agencies at all levels should be transparent and forthcoming with their plans for significant infrastructure projects that will affect communities. This public engagement should be early in the process so that the public is aware of the project and their suggestions or objections can be heard and acted upon.

This early engagement process also benefits elected officials who may not be aware of the project, and who need an early “heads up” that there are potential community concerns.

Finally, early engagement also benefits the agency so that they are aware of changes or objections early in the process at a time when project changes can still be made. By proceeding without this early public feedback, they take the risk of having to start the process all over again, all because of their lack of early public engagement and outreach.

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