

February 17, 2026

Committees: Economic Matters

Testimony: HB0461 - Economic Development - Rural Readiness Program and Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund – Establishment

Position: Support

Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and members of the Economic Matters Committee. My name is Dr. William Reid and on behalf of the Rural Maryland Council and Frederick County Progressives, I support HB0461-Economic Development - Rural Readiness Program and Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund

HB461 is important because it addresses a challenge many rural communities face—not a lack of ideas or motivation, but a lack of capacity. Too often, rural communities are expected to compete for grants and economic development opportunities without the planning resources, staffing, or technical support needed to succeed. This bill recognizes that readiness matters.

HB461 establishes the **Rural Readiness Program**, administered by the Rural Maryland Council, to help rural communities build the foundational skills they need before pursuing major funding opportunities. In practice, this means providing technical assistance, training, and planning support so communities can assess their strengths and gaps, improve governance and financial readiness, and identify realistic priorities. Communities that complete the program demonstrate that they are prepared to responsibly manage public funds and carry projects forward. Prioritizing these communities for certain grants is a smart, accountable use of taxpayer dollars.

The bill also establishes the **Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund**, which works hand in hand with the Rural Readiness Program. While the Readiness Program focuses on preparation, the Capacity Building Fund provides the resources needed to move from planning to action. These grants support collaborative planning, regional partnerships, organizational strengthening, and coordination across local governments and nonprofits. Importantly, this fund does not focus on one-off projects; it invests in rural communities' long-term ability to compete for and sustain economic development.

Together, these programs create a pipeline. First, communities build readiness. Then, they receive targeted funding to strengthen capacity and implement plans.

This approach reduces the risk of stalled projects, unused grant funds, and missed opportunities. It also levels the playing field so smaller or under-resourced rural communities are not left behind simply because they lack staff or grant-writing expertise.

HB461 is not about lowering standards—it is about raising the likelihood of success. By ensuring communities are prepared before receiving funding, the State is making a prudent investment in stronger outcomes, better stewardship of public resources, and more durable economic growth across rural Maryland.

On behalf of the Rural Maryland Council and Frederick County Progressives, I request your favorable support of HB461. This bill reflects a thoughtful, practical approach to rural economic development—one that recognizes that readiness and capacity are essential foundations for long-term success.