

Testimony In Support With Amendment of HB0893-Acquisition and Deposition of Abandoned(Unowned, Not neglected) Cemeteries

To the House Economic Matters Committee

Greetings

My name is Robert Alex Stubblefield and I am a poet, lay minister, and activist-organizer with groups such as the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition and I am writing in full support of House Bill 893-Acquisition and Deposition of Abandoned(Unowned, Not Neglected). My reasons are explained below.

I support this bill because it is inspired by the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition's victory at the Maryland Supreme Court which gave descendant communities in Maryland not only the right to bring suit against developers and/or government agencies but also that descendant communities have the right to seek equitable relief. A claim that we have often heard in our struggle is that local and state government can't do anything even with some statute on the books. What this bill does is that it takes away that excuse. Now it can actually pinpoint local agencies in any county to actually acquire and work with descendant communities to regain their cemeteries/burial grounds.

That being said, I do have a concern. The concern is that it makes acquiring a cemetery optional. This is a huge concern for several reasons. One reason is that many counties and municipalities have not worked with descendant communities in good faith. In fact, in many cases they have actually been hostile in the return of cemeteries to descendant groups and working hand in hand with private developers. This has been done despite the fact that descendant groups have come forward, shown both historical, genealogical, and archaeological records of their cemetery or cemeteries being in that area, counties and municipalities have not done anything to facilitate the return. Oftentimes, they have only issued a proclamation, a plaque or a weak apology and that's it. This bill cannot be only optional, it must be mandatory. It must compel local government to not only make a good faith effort to work with descendant communities but to actually acquire and transfer to descendant communities for them to do and properly take care of the cemetery and memorialize.

In closing, this bill is necessary but must be made stronger by an amendment to make mandatory to acquire an abandoned cemetery, not as an option.

Thank you