

Bill: SB0781: Environmental Permits - Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and Renewal, and Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health - CHERISH Our Communities Act)

Hearing Date: March 3, 2026

Bill Sponsor: Senator Brooks

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Committee Members: Senators Feldman, Kagan, Attar, Brooks, Carozza, Gallion, Harris, Hester, Simonaire, Washington, Watson

Submitting Organization: The Green Team of St John The Evangelist Roman Catholic Church

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair and Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing our testimony today in support of SB 0781: Environmental Permits - Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and Renewal, and Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health - CHERISH Our Communities Act). The Green Team at St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic (SJERC) Church in Columbia, Maryland, urges this committee to vote favorably on the CHERISH Act. Our group's mission is to care for all of God's creation, both the human and natural world, as instructed by Catholic social teaching. To that end, our activities include planting trees and gardens, educating ourselves and our communities about environmental issues, and engaging in advocacy. We are providing written testimony in strong support of SB0781, which would address the disproportionate environmental and public health harms that environmental justice communities in Maryland historically have and currently are facing.

For centuries, polluting facilities have been disproportionately and deliberately sited in minority and economically distressed communities in Maryland. And yet, the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) only considers permits for each facility and its emissions in a vacuum - not considering the total impact from the concentration of polluters in the surrounding community.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act will change this unjust system. The Act will require environmental justice review and community input for specific permits under consideration. These would include permits for specific types of facilities (identified by environmental justice communities in Maryland as the most important to address such as incinerators, fossil fuel plants, manufacturing facilities, or landfills), and in designated geographic areas (communities in and immediately around census tracts with an environmental justice score of 75 or above, according to the MDE's EJ Screening Tool). And if the MDE concludes that issuing the permit would harm nearby communities, the CHERISH Our Communities Act will protect the community: either by ensuring the permit is denied, or requiring additional controls for the facility and benefits for the community.

Maryland communities that have suffered from an undue and disproportionate burden of pollution should not have to endure further injury from new, expanded, or renewed permitted projects. SB 0781 provides a thoughtful process to avoid future harm. The Green Team of SJERC Church strongly supports SB0781 and urges a FAVORABLE report in Committee.