

Testimony Supporting SB0781

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 3, 2026

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

As a resident of Parkville MD, District 8 and a professional environmental scientist and educator concerned about environmental health and justice, I am writing to express my strong support of SB0781, the CHERISH Our Communities Act applying to MDE-issued permits.

I have been an environmental scientist focused on marine and atmospheric chemistry for over 30 years. One of my research areas with my undergraduate students is air pollution from particulate matter. As a result of this work, I've trained students how to monitor and assess air quality and assess the pollution levels in various areas around Baltimore City and county. I also work with students in an introductory environmental science course to assess the pollution sources and exposure where they live and in and around Baltimore. I receive a lot of feedback about this exercise being eye opening because many did not realize the proximity and the health burden on their communities.

Baltimore is a great city with a rich history. Unfortunately that history also includes environmental injustice which continues to this day. In district 8, a few years ago a friend who was the president of a local community organization asked me how their community could work to prevent a new air pollution source in their neighborhood since there were already so many sources and there wasn't a need for this new facility. I told her that unfortunately, they cannot consider the pollution sources when issuing a new permit, and then told her about this bill.

Both she and I live in areas that are overburdened by pollution according to Maryland EnviroScreen, and she lives in an area that is also underserved and overburdened. Meanwhile, at the institution where I work which is also in an overburdened and underserved area, students, staff, and faculty have been working to help the local community oppose yet another air pollution source that MDE permitted despite community opposition based on health concerns related to air quality.

My goal as a scientist and educator is to help people see the environment around them, both the good and the bad. Many communities already recognize the environmental burdens whether it is through having many people in their community with health issues, smelling the pollution, or seeing with their eyes the pollution around them. And it is

frustrating when permitting agencies do not have to listen to community members, but cannot consider the cumulative impacts on a community.

The CHERISH act incorporates consideration of cumulative impacts into Maryland's pollution permitting process. It is based on laws already passed in states such as New Jersey, Minnesota, and New York. It will enable protection for communities that are already overburdened by pollution, particularly air pollution. Through a deliberative public process, the Maryland Department of the Environment will determine if new polluters and renewed permits may contribute to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on nearby communities and will be able to use this assessment in their decision making. Unlike the current process that does not permit this consideration.

It is common sense to look at the whole picture when making a pollution permitting decision. This bill will contribute to improving community health through lowering pollution levels, potentially leading to lowering health costs and disease burden and reducing the impacts on school and work performance.

Sincerely,

Dr. Elizabeth Dahl