

Testimony in Support of SB0781 & SB0780

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

The South Baltimore Community Land Trust (SBCLT), We write in strong support of SB0781 and SB0780, the CHERISH Our Communities Act.

SBCLT is a community-based organization rooted in South Baltimore. We work to preserve affordable housing, prevent displacement, and build community control of land in neighborhoods that have long been overburdened by industrial pollution and environmental injustice. Our community sits on the front lines — surrounded by heavy industry, waste facilities, diesel truck traffic, and polluting infrastructure that has shaped the health and life expectancy of our residents for generations. We have over 70 permitted stationary polluting facilities alone in Brooklyn, Curtis Bay, and Hawkin's Point alone.

We are not only a frontline community impacted by these decisions; we also helped draft the CHERISH Our Communities Act to ensure that it meaningfully addresses the real-life conditions our residents face. Our involvement in shaping this legislation stems directly from our mission and on the ground expertise, ensuring that the bill reflects the lived experience, public health realities, and structural inequities present in communities like ours.

South Baltimore is not just a place on a map, it is home to families, elders, and children who have lived with the cumulative impacts of air pollution, contaminated soil, and industrial hazards. Many of our residents suffer from asthma, respiratory illness, and other chronic health conditions linked to environmental exposure. We have seen schools forced into lock down due to pollution events and neighborhoods placed at risk because polluting facilities were permitted without meaningful community input. We have also witnessed the complete displacement of neighboring communities such as Fairfield, Wagner's Point, and Hawkins Point — communities that were effectively erased as residential areas after decades of industrial encroachment and environmental harm. Their disappearance is a stark reminder that when cumulative impacts are ignored, the result is not only poor health outcomes but the loss of entire neighborhoods.

For too long, environmental justice communities like ours have been treated as sacrifice zones, places where the state allows additional pollution because industry already exists there. The CHERISH Our Communities Act is a critical step toward ending that pattern.

SB0781 would incorporate cumulative impacts into Maryland's permitting decisions for facilities regulated by the Maryland Department of the Environment. Currently, the state reviews permits one at a time, without fully accounting for the total pollution burden a community is already carrying. That approach ignores lived reality. In South Baltimore, pollution does not arrive one permit at a time — it accumulates.

This bill is thoughtfully designed. It is geographically targeted to communities already burdened by disproportionate pollution. It is limited in scope, applying primarily to specific air, water, and waste permits. It does not impact housing or ordinary construction. Instead, it focuses on the types of industrial activities that drive environmental injustice.

Just as importantly, SB0781 ensures public participation. Right now, nearby communities have no opportunity to comment on many types of air pollution permits. That exclusion is itself an injustice. CHERISH restores a basic democratic principle: the people most affected by pollution deserve a meaningful voice in the decision-making process.

SB0780 extends these same protections to Certificates of Public Convenience and Necessity for polluting energy generation. South Baltimore has historically borne the burden of fossil fuel infrastructure and energy-related pollution. No community that is already overburdened should be required to host additional polluting energy facilities to meet external energy demands.

Both bills allow state agencies to deny permits if a proposed facility would contribute to a disproportionate pollution and health burden. They also create a pathway to reduce pollution when existing facilities seek permit renewals. This is not radical policy — similar cumulative impact laws have already been enacted in New Jersey, Minnesota, and New York. Maryland should not lag behind in protecting its most vulnerable residents.

As a community land trust, our mission is to create stable, healthy neighborhoods where families can thrive. Housing justice and environmental justice are inseparable. Affordable homes do not protect families if the air they breathe harms their children. Stabilizing communities requires addressing the structural inequities that have concentrated pollution in Black, Brown, and working-class neighborhoods like South Baltimore.

We urge this Committee to stand with frontline communities and advance SB0781 and SB0780. The CHERISH Our Communities Act affirms that no Marylander should be forced to carry a disproportionate share of the state's pollution burden simply because of where they live.

Thank you for your consideration and your commitment to environmental justice.

Sincerely,
South Baltimore Community Land Trust