



DestinationSouthernMaryland.com  
301.343.2771

Southern Maryland National Heritage Area  
P. O. Box 745 | Hughesville, MD 20637

**Testimony to:**

House Environment and Transportation Committee

**Name:** Lucille W. Walker, Executive Director

**Organization:** Southern Maryland National Heritage Area

**Date:** February 16, 2026

**Issue:** HB 654 Natural Resources Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants

**Position:** FAVORABLE

On behalf of the Southern Maryland National Heritage Area, we write to express our strong support for **House Bill 654**. This bill (and the cross-file SB 638) represents an important step forward for the State of Maryland and for the residents of Southern Maryland by “lifting of the cap” on a very unique program: The Maryland Heritage Area Program. The Maryland Heritage Area Authority is funded through Program Open Space and is not funded through the general fund. The Maryland Heritage Area funding is a restricted line within Program Open Space funding and is not part of the Program Open Space formula.

This legislation is a straightforward “lift the cap” bill. It **does not mandate** new funding. It simply **removes the outdated cap**, allowing the program to grow **in future years if and when state revenues permit**. This ensures Maryland can continue responding to rising demand, supporting high-impact local projects, and remaining competitive with other states investing in heritage tourism.

Notably, of the \$6 million allocated statewide for this program, over \$5.1 million goes directly back to our communities by way of grants for economic stimulus. This program has a remarkable return on investment of \$7 in return for every \$1 of state funding, resulting in tangible economic impact. There are far more requests for funding than this program can provide at its current level. This year alone, the grant requests were more than double the funding available, which reflect powerful stories and histories that would benefit our state if funded. That being said, the significant impact of the current funding levels can be seen in Maryland’s museums, parks, trails, towns, cities, main streets, forests, waterways, and more.

Listed below are just some of the organizations in our region (Calvert, Charles, St. Mary’s, Southern Prince George’s counties) who have received important grants through this program, and are in support of this “lift the cap” legislation:

- The African American Heritage Society
- The Piscataway Conoy Tribal Council



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- Historic St. Mary's City Maryland
- Friends of St. Clement's Island and Museum
- St. Mary's County Museum Division
- Society for the Preservation of Port Tobacco
- Friends of Smallwood State Park
- Friends of Chapman State Park
- Friends of Piney Point Lighthouse and Museum
- Calvert Marine Museum
- Annemarie Sculpture Garden and Art Center
- American Chestnut Land Trust
- Surratt House and Museum
- Accokeek Foundation at Piscataway Park
- Chesapeake Railway Museum
- Bayside Museum
- Historic Sotterley
- Farm Heritage Conservancy
- Maryland Veterans Museum
- Greenwell Foundation at Greenwell State Park
- and *many more* including Historical Societies, Arts Councils, and Educational Institutions.

Now, more than ever, we need Maryland's Heritage Areas to flourish. Heritage areas share stories of courage, of freedom and equality, injustice and struggle, loss and achievement, and the triumph of the human spirit, all while growing the local, regional, and state economies!

The Southern Maryland National Heritage Area recognizes the thoughtful intent behind this legislation and believes its passage will result in meaningful and positive outcomes for our State. **This legislation preserves Maryland's flexibility to invest wisely when resources allow.**

We urge your favorable consideration and passage of HB654. We thank you for your continued leadership and dedication to the people of Maryland.

Respectfully submitted,