

HB 1465 - Environment - Stream and Floodplain Restoration Projects - Requirements and Limitations

COMMITTEE - Environment and Transportation

POSITION - FAVORABLE

HEARING DATE - March 11, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the Spring Grove Arboretum Association and the Catonsville Tree Canopy Project prepared by Jim Himel and William Rees.

Background

The Spring Grove Arboretum Association and the Catonsville Tree Canopy Project were on a trajectory to develop an arboretum on the campus of the Spring Grove Hospital. We had been working with MD Health Department officials and were on the verge of developing a pilot MOU to memorialize the arrangement. In the meantime, in cooperation with the on-site Hospital leadership, our groups and affiliated environmental organizations, planted 1,000+ trees on the campus. Many of the trees were provided by the MD DNR Forest Service Tremendous program and were planted with the help of a multitude of community volunteers including local elected officials. An Eagle Scout project was included in this effort. Unfortunately, the COVID shutdown temporarily halted the MOU negotiations. They were permanently ended once UMBC acquired ownership of the campus.

It is useful to point out that the area of the campus where the Arboretum was slated to be situated was along the Herbert Run stream valley on the east end of the campus that is tributary of the Patapsco River, entering the river not far from the Guinness Brewery in Halethorpe. The area surrounding the stream valley was heavily wooded with large old growth trees with a mid and lower level understory. The Forest floor had a deep and rich organic layer that provided a healthy biome and effectively acted as a sink and a sponge to absorb and regulate the distribution of rainwater within the stream valley. The stream and surrounding buffer area was in a steady state without bank scouring and undermining of the abundant and healthy adjacent tree canopy.

Current Situation

In the early fall of 2025, the Catonsville community was surprised to encounter a large scale construction project underway on the Spring Grove Campus in the stream valley. Large swaths of trees had been removed and the early stages of grading around the stream valley were evident.

Our team immediately began to try to understand who and why the work was occurring. Contrary to standard practice for large construction projects, there was no identified construction trailer nor was there any signage to indicate the purpose of the project or under whose authorization it was occurring.

We contacted our elected officials and through them learned that the work was being done by UMBC using Whiting-Turner as the general contractor. Our elected officials contacted their UMBC

contacts and solicited information about the project. We were seeking background information including but not limited to a project narrative, sediment and erosion control documents, forest conservation plans, etc. We also unsecesssfully tried to have a meeting with the appropriate UMBC officials about the project.

While the attempted engagement was playing out, more construction work occurred until today, most of the campus forest along the stream valley has been removed and the stream valley is unrecognizable subsequent to extensive grading and large scale tree removal along Herbert Run and tributaries. It is important to also note that the last spring on the campus for which the campus was named was and still is literally on the very edge of destruction, without adequate protection from the heavy construction machinery.

We noticed what we believed to be extensive sediment and erosion control violations and illegal intrusions into wetlands. In advance of this work and until this writing, there has been absolutely no direct outreach to the community about the project. In the absence of any engagement forthcoming from UMBC, we contacted MDE who subsequently issued 30+ non-compliance violations to the contractor(s). After that, with still no engagement by UMBC, we reached out to a reporter from the Baltimore Sun who has since documented the debacle in two related articles. After the articles were published, we received documents related to the forest conservation aspects of the work, while the Sun reporter received sediment and erosion control plans in a read-only format almost impossible to decipher on a computer screen.

Conclusion

The upshot of this message is that a State Institution implemented a large scale project ostensibly to upgrade force mains and sewer lines combined with a stream restoration project. A significant amount of the land dedicated to stream restoration was well beyond the 'pipe' project, required massive grading and soil relocation, and included large scale tree removal - all with no community contact whatsoever. Additionally, historic infrastructure such as the spring and potential unmarked gravesites were absent from the planning and implementation process.

HB 1465 if implemented would address each and every wrong turn made in the Spring Grove Project that unnecessarily destroyed the intricate ecology that existed in the Herbert Run stream valley. It was clearly a boiler plate, heavy-handed stream restoration project that ignored less expensive, more environmentally sensitive solutions that would not have destroyed the complex ecology that had developed over the past century along the stream valley. It was a solution in search of a problem that didn't exist.

We look forward to your favorable consideration of this bill.

Respectfully Submitted,

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