



Testimony in Support of House Bill 254 – Supporting Inclusive Community Adaptation Act

February 9, 2025

To Chair Korman and members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in **SUPPORT** of **HB254** on behalf of ShoreRivers. ShoreRivers is a river protection organization on Maryland's Eastern Shore with more than 2,000 members. Our mission is to protect Maryland's Eastern Shore waterways through science-based advocacy, restoration, education, and engagement.

Environmental restoration projects like tree plantings, native gardens, and innovative drainage can address community problems including chronic flooding, rampant pollution, and heat islands. These projects can make communities safer, healthier, more beautiful, and more economically vibrant. For these projects to succeed and create lasting investment, the community must be engaged in every phase, and must feel some ownership of the project's future use and maintenance. Right now, few restoration projects meet that high standard. **This bill will recognize and fund Community Ambassadors, an important step in building resilient communities to protect both Maryland's historic towns and our irreplaceable rivers.**

Community Ambassadors are community members whose role in a project is formalized and co-designed, and who are paid for their time and expertise. They are often community pillars already doing various kinds of unpaid work to serve the urgent needs of their neighbors. These ambassadors bring valuable insights, including the problems their community faces as well as its strengths; the potential barriers to restoration work; how to reach other community members; and the best times and venues to hold meetings. A Community Ambassador can both represent their community to the project team and can represent the project back to the larger community, answering questions and ensuring that the community's feedback continues to be heard. Paying these community members is an essential part of building trust and transferring ownership of restoration projects, like tree plantings, to the community. If these community members are spending time on an environmental restoration project, they may be spending less time at their paid jobs or caring for their family and community. Fair compensation for the time they spend on a restoration project ensures that capacity isn't being drained from their household and community.

At a 2019 partner meeting about chronic flooding in an underserved Eastern Shore community, the representative of that community in attendance reminded us, "I'm the only person not being paid to be here today." The next time we applied for funding, we made sure to include stipends for such ambassadors, but funders struggled to understand how to budget or categorize those dollars. These relationships are not quite the same as those with professional contractors, though they are just as valuable. **We are in strong support of this bill that both formalizes and values deep, mutual engagement by ensuring fair compensation of Community Ambassadors.**

ShoreRivers currently pays Community Ambassadors in our Tree the Shore program. Working to meet Maryland's ambitious goal to plant five million trees, these ambassadors help to identify sites in their towns that need trees and to reach relevant landowners and decision makers at the individual and municipal level. We are also a Connector and Technical Assistance Provider through the Chesapeake Bay Trust's Community-Based Organization Capacity Building Initiative. This effort helps to mentor small nonprofits, congregations, and community groups in applying for their first

environmental restoration grants. We pay community members for their time to learn the often long and difficult task of applying for this funding, from identifying the right practices to soliciting contractor bids to navigating complex grant portals. One of the first Community Ambassadors we helped secure funding to engage now has a full-time job with a partner organization– Envision the Choptank– working to restore the Choptank River, proving that this model can serve as workforce development and can help add important new perspectives to restoration work in our towns.

Sincerely,

Darran White Tilghman, Director of Community Engagement, and
Annie Richards, Chester Riverkeeper on behalf of:

ShoreRivers

Scott Budden, Executive Director

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