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Testimony in SUPPORT of HB247 – Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area Protection Program – Variance - Alterations

Environment & Transportation Committee
February 11, 2026

Dear Chair Korman and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **SUPPORT of HB247** on behalf of Arundel Rivers Federation. Deeply rooted in the South, West, and Rhode Rivers, Arundel Rivers Federation heals and protects our waterways and champions clean water across Maryland. Our vision is healthy waterways for all, and we achieve our mission through restoration, education and outreach, and Riverkeeper programs.

Our critical areas are among Maryland’s most treasured and vital natural resources – this land helps protect water quality and wildlife habitat. This legislation will strengthen protection to the critical area while providing clear and reasonable standards for variances. House Bill 247 seeks to update and simplify the variance process, promoting consistency when applying the variance standards. It will (1) incorporate case law into the variance standards and (2) support local administrative approvals.

House Bill 247 will provide clarity on how to compare a variance request to the situation of other properties in the vicinity of the application. As a Riverkeeper, I often see requests for variances to build within the critical area because “my neighbor was able to.” This bill will clarify that neighboring properties may only be considered in comparison if that structure was developed after the adoption of the local jurisdiction’s critical area program. Additionally, the applicant must prove that the development cannot be located in another area outside of the critical area, or that the need for the variance is not based on convenience, personal preference, or financial advantage. HB247 reduces ambiguity and ensures that necessary land use changes can proceed with minimal environmental impacts.

Maryland chose to specifically protect the Critical Area by limiting development practices allowed within it – this bill strengthens those protections and helps local governments and property owners clearly understand expectations and requirements. Arundel Rivers Federation strongly supports the protection and preservation of our critical areas we respectfully request a **favorable report** on HB247.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elle Bassett".

Elle Bassett
South, West, and Rhode Riverkeeper
Arundel Rivers Federation