

Dear Chair Korman and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

My name is Rishit Guttam. I am a junior at Marriotts Ridge High School in Howard County, and I serve as Co-President of Illuminate Maryland, a youth-led civic advocacy organization focused on environmental justice and building a more sustainable future for all Marylanders.

I am thrilled to be able to write in support of HB1268, the CHERISH Our Communities Act applying to MDE-issued permits.

My generation has grown up reading about the consequences of unchecked pollution. For many young Marylanders, this is personal. They live near the facilities, and either have asthma themselves or know many students who do. The science on cumulative pollution exposure and its health effects is not new, and yet our permitting system has continued to evaluate pollution sources in isolation, without accounting for the total burden already being placed on a community.

Through my work with Illuminate Maryland, I have talked with students from across the state about this issue. The climate crisis resonates deeply with them, and they are looking to their elected officials for action. They understand that the current system allows pollution to pile up in the same communities over and over, and they want that to change. HB1268 takes a real step toward addressing that by requiring Maryland's Department of the Environment to consider cumulative impacts before issuing permits to pollute in overburdened communities. States like New Jersey, Minnesota, and New York have already passed similar laws, and New Jersey's version has already survived a legal challenge from polluting industry.

As a student, I think about the world my peers and I are inheriting. We didn't create the legacy of concentrated industrial pollution in environmental justice communities, but we will live with it longest. It matters deeply to us that where you live in Maryland shouldn't determine how clean your air is or how healthy your family gets to be.

This bill applies only to areas already burdened by disproportionate pollution, only to specific permit types, and requires a public process, meaning communities finally have a real seat at the table.

I urge this committee to support HB1268. Our communities and the young people who will inherit them are counting on you.

Sincerely,
Rishit Guttam