

February 16, 2026

The Honorable Marc Korman
Chairman, House Environment and Transportation Committee
250 Taylor Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

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

Dear Chair Korman and Members of the House E&T Committee,

I am writing on behalf of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, representing almost 700 organizations with over 40,000 employees, to express our strong support for Maryland House Bill 654, which seeks to lift the cap on funding for the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA). The Maryland Heritage Area Authority Grant Program provides vital funding to support the preservation of the state's historical, archaeological, natural, and cultural resources. It also fosters economic development through heritage tourism in designated heritage areas. However, over the past three fiscal years, the program has faced a significant funding gap, with an average shortfall of \$8 million between the requested funds and what can be awarded.

Additionally, inflation and the passage of time have diminished the purchasing power of the grants, making it increasingly difficult for organizations to complete their projects effectively. Currently, the program's funding is capped at \$6 million, which is distributed annually to organizations across the state, including Baltimore City and all counties. Given the growing demand for heritage tourism funding, legislation is needed to increase this cap. Specifically, we urge support for the authorization of Program Open Space to transfer funds from \$6 million up to \$12 million annually to the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority Financing Fund.

The economic impact of investing in heritage tourism is undeniable. With increased and targeted funding, we can expand marketing initiatives, enhance visitor services, and develop compelling programs that showcase Maryland's rich and diverse history. This not only fosters local pride but also generates significant revenue, supporting businesses and creating jobs within the tourism sector.

The Washington County Chamber of Commerce fully supports Maryland House Bill 654 and strongly encourages its favorable review and passage. We believe that increasing funding for the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority is a critical step toward preserving our cultural heritage and strengthening the economic vitality of our communities.

Please contact me if you need any additional information.

Sincerely,



Paul Frey, IOM

President & CEO

GROWTH.
COMMUNITY.
SUCCESS.

