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February 12, 2026

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

Re: House Bill 654 - Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants

Dear Chair Korman:

On behalf of the Southern Maryland Delegation of the Maryland General Assembly, we write to express our support for **Senate Bill 638** and **House Bill 654. Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants.**

This legislation represents an important step forward for both the State of Maryland and the residents of Southern Maryland by lifting the cap on a unique and highly effective program, the Maryland Heritage Areas. The Maryland Heritage Area Authority is not funded through the general fund. Instead, it is supported through a restricted line within Program Open Space funding and is not part of the Program Open Space formula.

Of the \$6 million allocated statewide for this program, over \$5.1 million is returned directly to our local communities by way of grants that drive economic activity. The program delivers a remarkable return on investment, generating approximately \$7 for every \$1 of state funding.

Demand far exceeds current capacity. This year alone, grant requests total more than \$12 million, reflecting powerful projects and stories that would benefit the State if funded. Even at current levels, the program's impact is visible across Maryland's museums, parks, trails, towns, cities, main streets, forests, waterways, and more.

Southern Maryland has benefited significantly from this program. Examples include the Commemoration to the Enslaved in St. Mary's county, an artwork/history piece/poem that brings the lives of those once forced into enslavement back to us on the very site where an enslaved family's cabin once stood; preservation efforts in Port Tobacco, Maryland's largest international seaport prior to the American Revolution and home to the Ptopaco Tribe for thousands of years; and exhibits at the Calvert Marine Museum that explore the power of water on our peninsula and highlight a way of life that is rapidly disappearing. Each of these projects strengthens local organizations, supports small towns and brings lasting economic value to their communities.

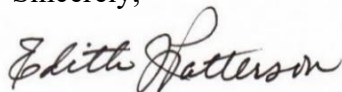
Now, more than ever, Maryland's Heritage Areas must be positioned to grow. Heritage Areas tell stories of courage, of freedom and equality, injustice and struggle, loss and achievement, and the triumph of the human spirit. Heritage Areas reinforce a strong sense of historical character, attract talent, increase tourism revenues, enhance business development, and strengthen local economies.

Importantly, this legislation carries no fiscal mandate. The bill language is intentionally permissive using "may" and "up to" rather than "shall," reflecting an awareness of the budgetary constraints both for the General Fund and Program Open Space funds. This is not a request for immediate additional funding. It is a necessary legislative adjustment to remove an outdated cap and allow for responsible future growth.

The Southern Maryland Delegation recognizes the thoughtful intent behind this legislation and believes its passage will result in meaningful and positive outcomes for our State. This bill strikes the right balance between fiscal responsibility and long-term investment in Maryland's cultural and economic vitality.

For these reasons, the Southern Maryland Delegation respectfully urges favorable consideration and passage of **SB 638 and HB 654**. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Edith J. Patterson". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Delegate Edith J. Patterson
Chair, Southern Maryland Delegation