

Testimony: SB 638, Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

HB 654, House Environment and Transportation Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

From: Diane Boettcher, 3635 Epping Forest Way, Owings Mills, MD 21117;
diane.boettcher@gmail.com; 813-629-9334

****Testimony: SB 638 / HB 654****

****Position: Favorable****

I am writing as a member of the Board of Directors of the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area and as someone who has personally seen the difference this program makes on the ground in our communities.

The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority program is often discussed in terms of numbers—return on investment, grant totals, economic impact—but for me, its value is best understood through places and people. One example that stands out is Ellsworth Cemetery, a historic Black cemetery in Westminster. For many years, the cemetery was largely unknown outside of a small circle of descendants and local historians. Information about who was buried there, why the site mattered, and how it fit into Westminster’s broader history was hard to find.

Through the work supported by the Heritage Area, that has begun to change. Improved interpretation and outreach have made it easier for residents, students, and visitors to learn about Ellsworth Cemetery and the lives of the people buried there. Clearer information, better visibility, and a stronger connection to the surrounding community have transformed the site from an overlooked burial ground into a place of learning and reflection. That kind of impact does not always show up neatly in a budget line, while it matters deeply to the people whose history is being preserved and shared.

SB 638 and HB 654 would allow more of this work to happen. By lifting the current cap on MHAA funding, the State positions itself to better meet the demand for projects that strengthen local economies while also preserving Maryland’s diverse and often under-told history. It is important to note that the Heritage Areas program is not funded through the general fund, but through Program Open Space, as a restricted line that sits outside the Program Open Space formula.

Under current law, up to \$6 million may be allocated statewide, with more than \$5.1 million flowing directly back to communities through grants. Even at this level, the program

delivers a remarkable return, yet demand far exceeds available resources. This year alone, requests totaled more than \$12 million for projects that would support tourism, sustain jobs, and generate state and local tax revenue.

The impact of these investments can be seen across Maryland—in museums, trails, downtowns, parks, and historic sites like Ellsworth Cemetery. These places are not only preserved; they are made accessible and meaningful to the public.

I also appreciate the careful drafting of this legislation. There is no fiscal mandate. The use of “may” and “up to,” rather than “shall,” reflects an understanding of current budget constraints and makes clear that this is an adjustment to allow for future growth, not a demand for immediate new spending.

For all of these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to give favorable consideration to SB 638 and HB 654. These bills strike the right balance between fiscal responsibility and the long-term benefits of investing in Maryland’s heritage and communities.