



TO: House Environment & Transportation Committee
FROM: Garrett County Chamber of Commerce
DATE: February 18, 2026

RE: **HB654 – Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants**

The Garrett County Chamber of Commerce is the largest professional business association in Garrett County with over 500 members representing every industry in the region. The Chamber was formed to organize, support, and represent Garrett County's business community in advancing common interests and promote our county's hospitality and recreation industries by attracting visitors through comprehensive marketing.

We are writing in support of HB654 – legislation that would increase the amount of funding authorized for transfer from Program Open Space to the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA).

Maryland's Heritage Areas are locally designated and State-certified regions where public and private partners make commitments to preserving historical, cultural and natural resources for sustainable economic development through heritage tourism. The Maryland Heritage Area Program is an outstanding initiative that fosters community-driven projects, which in turn stimulate local economies across Maryland. The return on investment is impressive—every \$1 of state funding generates a \$7 return.

In Garrett County, we are proud to be home to the Mountain Maryland Gateway to the West (MMGTW). As the gateway to the opening and development of America's western frontier in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Garrett County's MMGTW is rich with history and tourism. The area includes Braddock's Road and the Historic National Road – pathways that spurred the building of traveler related businesses including blacksmith shops, taverns and inns. Today, Marylanders and out-of-towners can visit some of our attractions – Pennington Cottage, Friend's Store, or the Oakland B&O Museum.

Increasing the cap on funding for the MHAA would go a long way in helping our community continue to shine as a destination for historical tourism.

For these reasons, we urge the committee to issue a **FAVORABLE COMMITTEE REPORT** for HB654.

