



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

January 29, 2026

SB 234

Business Regulation –Abandoned Cemeteries – Acquisition and Disposition

Senate Finance Committee

Position: Unfavorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) offers testimony in opposition to **Senate Bill 234**. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

While we appreciate SB 234’s intention to address neglected burial sites, the legislation raises significant concerns for religiously operated cemeteries. **SB 234** allows third parties to initiate legal processes regarding cemeteries deemed “abandoned.” For religious cemeteries, this raises serious religious liberty concerns:

- **Interference with internal religious governance:** Decisions about the care, maintenance, and long-term stewardship of a Catholic cemetery are guided by canon law and pastoral judgment.
- **Risk of state-supervised alteration or transfer:** A court could be placed in the position of evaluating or overriding decisions rooted in religious doctrine.
- **Potential for disputes initiated by individuals with no connection to the faith community:** This undermines the autonomy of religious institutions to care for their sacred spaces.

The First Amendment protects the right of religious communities to manage their own burial grounds without undue state intrusion. SB 234 threatens that autonomy.

Many parishes maintain historic cemeteries with limited financial resources. These cemeteries are not abandoned, they are lovingly preserved within the means available. SB 234 could unintentionally:

- Create new legal vulnerabilities for parishes
- Force religious institutions into costly legal processes
- Pressure dioceses to consolidate or transfer cemeteries to avoid misclassification

This is an unnecessary burden on faith communities that already take their responsibilities seriously.

SB 234's treatment of "abandoned cemeteries" risks sweeping in religious cemeteries that are active in a spiritual and pastoral sense, even if they are quiet or historic. It threatens the sacred character of burial grounds, introduces avoidable religious liberty concerns, and risks state intrusion into the internal governance of faith communities.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference respectfully urges the Committee to issue an **unfavorable report** on SB 234.