

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr and Members of the GLE Committee,

I am writing in **support of SB 623** because this bill provides businesses like mine a realistic path to growth. My shop, Tobacco Leaf, is located in Howard County and I have operated in the county for over 15 years, since 2010.

This bill would benefit my business greatly. Currently we are a BYO establishment and allow patrons to bring their own spirits of choice to enjoy with a handmade premium cigar. We provide the appropriate glassware and ice to ensure the guests have a premium experience. Further, it is our responsibility to ensure that all guests are over the age of 21, and don't over consume their own alcohol which they bring, all things a bar or restaurant with a license to serve would do as well. In my case however, we provide all of these services with no direct positive economic benefit to our business. No additional revenue for our business; no additional taxes being generated for the county or state.

If this bill were to pass, I would be strengthening my business, and as a result, further adhering to the enforcement measures of this bill while preserving the future of our operations.

Currently, it is not easy to expand in a way that makes sense financially while still staying within a clear regulatory structure. This bill creates that structure. With limits like one license per 150,000 residents and local board oversight, it is clear this is meant to be controlled growth, not overdevelopment. That matters to me as someone who is invested in my community and the wellbeing of my customers.

For my business, this is about building on what already exists. I am not trying to turn my operation into something completely different, simply trying to add a premium service that I know my customers will benefit from. We cater to a niche community of adults over the age of 21 who enjoy handmade premium cigars in a sophisticated and luxurious environment. By being allowed to serve, we won't be altering the identity of our business simply trying to strengthen and enhance it, while keeping customers local, and staying competitive.

I see this all the time, customers asking why they must leave Howard County or even Maryland for this kind of experience when they would rather stay here. I question, why should my business or the State lose out on this revenue growth? There is a real local economic impact. When people stay here, the revenue generated stays here benefitting local and state economies. It supports small businesses like mine, the employees who work there, and the surrounding area. Even limited expansion under this bill would allow me to reinvest, whether that is hiring, improving the space, or just keeping the business competitive long term.

The bill also sets clear expectations. The 70 percent revenue requirement tied to premium cigars and related products ensures businesses like mine stay true to what they are supposed to be. The hours, the age restrictions, and the compliance requirements are reasonable. From my perspective, that kind of clarity is what allows a business to operate responsibly without potentially harmful ambiguity.

At the end of the day, SB 623 gives small business owners like me a path forward that is structured, limited, and workable. It allows us to grow without disrupting the balance of our communities.

For those reasons, I support Senate Bill 623 and encourage you to do so as well.