



Maryland | Delaware | DC Press Association

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To: Government Labor and Elections Committee

From: Rebecca Snyder, Executive Director, MDDC Press Association

Date: February 20, 2026

Re: MDDC FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS HB 576

The Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association (MDDC) represents a diverse membership of news media organizations. Our membership includes large metro dailies such as *The Washington Post* and *The Baltimore Sun*, hometown newspapers such as *The Star Democrat* and *Dorchester Star*, specialty publications such as *The Daily Record* and *Baltimore Jewish Times*, and leading online news organizations such as *Baltimore Banner*, *Maryland Matters*, and *Baltimore Brew*. Our membership spans both for-profit and nonprofit models and reflects the full ecosystem of local journalism that Marylanders depend on every day. Our members rely on public records, including those from the State Archives to inform Marylanders about topics in their communities.

The Press Association supports HB 576, which would require the State Archives to go through the regulatory process before implementing a fee structure. We believe that access to records could be strengthened further by exempting news media organizations from those fees, much like the public interest exemption works in Maryland's Public Information Act. This could be accomplished by adding language on Page 1, after line 21: "The State Archive will grant a fee waiver for records if the requester is part of a news media organization, which requests records in the public interest."

Early in 2025, the Maryland State Archives planned to implement a per page charge to access Land Records through mdlandrec.net. This change was to be implemented without any input from the public and in total disregard for news organizations that are reporting in the public interest. We understand the economic challenges facing the State, but putting up a paywall for public records such as land records and deeds deeply concerns our membership. It violates the spirit of Maryland's Public Information Act, which provides for a fee waiver for the public interest or indigency. If the State Archives implements fees, especially outside of the regulatory process which would provide an avenue for public comment, every journalist will essentially have a surcharge imposed for any story written that involves land records.

Fees create barriers to access for all members of the public, not simply journalists. The stakes are high. In Baltimore and throughout the State, journalists are working with land records to understand the web of ownership for all sorts of properties. Maryland struggles with foreign investors and bad actors purchasing real estate through intentionally obfuscating webs of LLC companies – and the only way to untangle those threads is through mdlandrec.net. This is just one example of the type of records that may arbitrarily have curtailed access.

We urge the committee to preserve public access to these records by requiring the State Archives to go through a regulatory process before setting fees, AND to exempt news media from those fees.



We believe a strong news media is central to a strong and open society.