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Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Testimony on: SB 484, Land Use - Affordable Housing - Zoning Density and Permitting
(Housing Expansion and Affordability Act of 2024)
Position: Support
Hearing Date: March 1, 2024

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports the Housing Expansion and Affordability Act of 2024. SB 484 would allow density bonuses for housing developments that include a certain percentage of income-restricted affordable homes, along with other provisions to make residential projects move through the approval process more quickly.

We commend the Governor for his bold legislative package to address housing affordability in Maryland. Housing is too expensive almost everywhere across the state and is especially too expensive in places that are highly desirable due to their access to jobs and amenities. As Sierra Club's Urban Infill Guidance states, how we build cities and towns has a profound effect on the causes and impacts of climate change.¹ An essential strategy for reducing carbon emissions is supporting dense, mixed-use communities and land uses. Often the most expensive places to live are also the places where people could best reduce their carbon footprint by having shorter drives to work and other destinations or would have more sustainable transportation options, such as walking, biking, or using public transit.

Maryland makes massive investments in its rail transportation infrastructure. It makes sense that the state would play a role in enabling as many Marylanders to enjoy living near those investments as possible. More homes near transit will boost ridership and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Sierra Club believes that development areas served by public transportation, shared transportation, and other public infrastructure should be zoned for dense, multi-family, and mixed-use development in order to reduce emissions and waste.²

We also believe that creating inclusive communities is key to a more sustainable, fair future. As such, we are pleased that the Governor is using this legislation as an opportunity to boost the production of both badly needed market-rate and affordable housing. As we recognize that high requirements for affordability can be a barrier to such new production, we would support consideration of reducing the required percentage of dedicated affordable units in certain types of buildings. This consideration could be especially relevant for duplexes, triplexes, and similar developments, where there might not be enough market rate units to subsidize the cost of providing a below market-rate affordable unit.³

¹ https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/Infill%20Policy_5.18.2019.pdf

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³ Portland, Oregon's Residential Infill Project (RIP), for example, re-legalized small multiunit housing without affordability requirements in single-unit neighborhoods, and allowed for up to sixplexes that set aside some units for households making below the median income. One year after RIP passed, Portland found that legalizing multiunit housing resulted in more housing opportunities in high-amenity parts of the city, but out of the 271 units, only one was a sixplex that provided affordable units.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.

Climate change, land use, affordability, equity, and transportation are all inextricably entwined. Legislation like this is the right path forward to meeting the state's goals on all of these important issues. Therefore, we urge the committee to provide a favorable report for SB 484.

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