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Committee: Appropriations

Testimony on: HB1099 – Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund and Study

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 24, 2021

The Maryland Chapter of Sierra Club supports HB1099 to establish the Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund to identify, preserve, restore, protect, maintain, or commemorate graves, monuments, or markers at historic African American cemeteries. The bill will require the Department of Planning to administer the Fund in coordination with the Commission on African American History and Culture.

The need for a Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund with specific requirements is clear based on the historic devaluing and destruction of African American cemeteries for buildings and transportation infrastructure, and current threats to historic African American cemeteries by new construction. This includes the threat to the National Historic Register Eligible Moses Morningstar Cemetery in Cabin John, Maryland, which is at risk from the proposed toll lane widening in the developer-led I-495/I-270 Managed Lanes Project.

The historical and cultural significance of African American cemeteries has been aptly summarized by Clarence B. Jones, a Scholar in Residence at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute at Stanford University who served as personal counsel and close advisor to Dr. King:

Throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th, African Americans were segregated even in death, often buried in off-the-beaten-path black cemeteries that, over the years, received little funding and fell into disrepair. ... [Historic African American cemeteries] are not only important spiritual monuments for families but also gateways into the people, places and events that shaped our nation. ... Americans should reaffirm our commitment to preserving our history and protecting it for generations to come. ... It is part of an important process to continue working for equality, even for those who came before us.¹

We strongly support state funding to preserve and protect historic African American cemeteries.

In summary, this bill contains an important and reasonable allocation for a threatened class of cemeteries in Maryland. We urge this Committee to issue a favorable report.

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¹ Jones, C. B. May 2017. Black cemeteries are crucially important — and all too often neglected. Washington Post.