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**Committee: Finance**

**Testimony on: HB30 – “Office of People’s Counsel – Alterations (Office of People’s Counsel Environmental Reform Act)”**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing Date: March 23, 2021**

The Maryland Sierra Club strongly supports HB30, as amended in the House, and urges a favorable report. This bill is a perfect complement to legislation which the Senate (and the House) already has approved this session, SB83 (HB298).

The bill now before this Committee, HB30, expands the portfolio of the Office of People’s Counsel (OPC) – representing the interests of residential and noncommercial ratepayers before the Public Service Commission (PSC) and other bodies – to include environmental, economic, and public safety interests of Maryland residents. In particular, OPC’s duties now would include advocating on matters relating to Maryland’s greenhouse gas emission-reduction goals. This would be funded through a small increase in the assessment on public service companies already used to fund OPC.

OPC plays a vital role in assisting the PSC in carrying out the PSC’s broad and consequential regulatory authority. By authorizing the OPC to engage on environmental, economic, and public safety issues, OPC’s opportunity to meaningfully and effectively assist the PSC will, in important ways, better align with the issues which the PSC addresses. In this regard, the PSC’s governing statute already specifies that PSC must consider these types of matters: “[i]n supervising and regulating public service companies, the [PSC] shall consider the public safety, the economy of the State, the conservation of natural resources, and the preservation of environmental quality.” MD Pub. Util. Art. sec. 2-113.

With regard to climate mitigation issues, the PSC is one of the most significant state actors in determining whether the state will achieve the climate goals enacted by the General Assembly. The PSC is responsible for approving all large electricity generating facilities; manages the state’s energy efficiency program, EmPOWER Maryland; and is participating in efforts to establish the infrastructure needed to support a vast increase in plug-in electric vehicles. The PSC, however, recently concluded that its governing statute does not allow it to consider the impacts of its decisions on the state’s greenhouse gas emissions. In order to correct this, SB83/HB298 explicitly provides that the PSC shall consider the state’s climate mitigation goals when these goals are relevant to the decisions the PSC is making. That legislation also clarifies that the PSC’s consideration of economic concerns includes consideration of “fair and stable labor standards for affected workers.”

HB30 complements SB83/HB298. It would strengthen the PSC’s consideration of climate and other environmental issues by providing a further source of expertise to assist the PSC in analyzing complex and multifaceted scientific and public policy matters.

We urge a favorable report on HB30, as amended by the House.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.