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Committee: Finance
Testimony on: SB 948 – “Public Utilities – Electric School Bus Pilot Program”
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: March 22, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of Sierra Club strongly supports SB 948 which would establish an electric school bus pilot program that would be funded by investor-owned electric companies. The goal of the program is to enable school districts to purchase zero-emission electric school buses instead of diesel buses at no additional cost to the school districts. Diesel buses are a major source of greenhouse gases and health-damaging toxic emissions, so they need to be replaced. The innovative program proposed in SB 948 would allow electric utilities to recover reasonable costs of the pilot program through a ratepayer adjustment, and when electric school buses are not in use, the utilities would be able to access stored energy from bus batteries when energy demand is high.

The electric school bus pilot program would be administered by the Public Service Commission (PSC) and would run for a period of three to five years. The program would involve investor-owned electric companies applying to the PSC to implement an electric school bus pilot program within the territory they serve. Each participating utility would provide electric school bus rebates to participating school systems and deploy a minimum of 25 electric school buses. Total rebates paid by each participating utility would be limited to \$50,000,000.

There are approximately 7,200 diesel school buses in Maryland now that travel more than 128 million miles every year in total. Each diesel school bus emits about 27 tons of climate-damaging CO₂ per year – six times as much as an average car. Diesel exhaust contains more than 40 toxic air contaminants that can cause or worsen diseases such as cancer and asthma, particularly in young children whose bodies are more susceptible to its health-damaging properties. Studies show a child riding inside of a diesel school bus may be exposed to as much as 15 times the level of toxic diesel exhaust compared to someone riding in a car. Diesel exhaust also contributes to ozone pollution, smog, and acid rain. More than 80% of Marylanders live in counties that do not meet federal clean air standards for ozone, due in large part to vehicle tailpipe emissions.

Electric school buses have lower costs of operation and maintenance than diesel school buses as they have fewer engine components and much lower fuel costs. Electricity that must be generated to charge electric vehicle batteries is increasingly coming from renewable wind and solar power sources, and the percentage of clean, renewable energy generated continues to grow. Electric school buses are also much quieter, allowing drivers to communicate more easily with students.

In summary, SB 948 proposes an innovative way to help school systems purchase electric school buses. The program would reduce the climate and health-damaging diesel school bus exhaust fumes our children and environment now endure, while providing electricity to the grid from bus batteries during the summer when electricity demand is at its highest and school buses are not in use. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on this bill.

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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.