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**Committee:** Appropriations

**Testimony on:** HB 1324 – “Transportation – Maryland Rail Authority – Establishment (Maryland Rail Investment Act of 2022)”

**Position:** Favorable

**Hearing Date:** March 8, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB 1324. The bill would establish the Maryland Rail Authority (MRA) in the Department of Transportation which would be responsible for the supervision, financing, construction, operation, maintenance and repair of rail and transit projects in the state. The projects overseen by the MRA would include improving the Brunswick, Camden, and Penn Lines of the Maryland Area Rail Commuter (MARC) service; extending MARC service to Newark, DE, Northern Virginia, and Western Maryland; replacing the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel; and planning, designing, engineering, constructing, operating, and maintaining the Southern Maryland Rapid Transit System. The MRA would be flexible so it could operate independently or in cooperation with the Maryland Transit Administration and potentially with a regional transit commission if one were to be created.

The MRA would be funded by federal grants, revenue from “optimal” tolling at Maryland’s eight tolled highways and bridges, fare revenue, and the sale of revenue bonds, notes, and other financial obligations. An optimal tolling strategy would involve setting tolls at or near the highest amount a user would be willing to pay, with appropriate discounts offered to local residents, seniors, and others, and with sufficient funds from tolling reserved to handle road and bridge maintenance needs. Optimal tolling is used in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania to raise funds for rail expansion, and is consistent with efforts increasingly promoted by transportation planners and environmental organizations across the country to adopt measures that will reduce vehicle miles traveled on roadways (as people seek to avoid high tolls) and encourage greater use of rail and transit to decrease pollution and traffic congestion.

Transportation is the largest contributor to climate-disrupting greenhouse gases in Maryland and our nation, and is a major source of toxic emissions that are hazardous to human health. Most of that pollution comes from the tailpipes of gas and diesel-fueled cars and trucks on the road today. Reliable rail and transit service is a far more cost-effective and environmentally-friendly way for people to travel from one location to another, and better serves lower-income individuals and many young people today who do not own a car but need reliable transportation to access jobs, housing, medical services, shopping, recreation, and entertainment. An MRA also could mandate that all its vehicles have zero-emissions, which would further decrease air pollution.

In summary, a Maryland Rail Authority would be poised to take advantage of funding from the federal infrastructure bill, would expand rail and transit projects that the state desperately needs, and would get more cars off the road which would be better for public health and the environment, and lead to more prosperous and sustainable growth in our region. We urge 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.