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**Committee: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs**

**Testimony on: HB 156 “Local Governments – Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones – Authorization”**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing Date: March 30, 2022**

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges the Committee’s support of HB 156. This bill would give local governments the authority to define and institute urban agricultural zones that are best adapted to a local population’s specific environmental circumstances and to the unique food supply needs of the local community. The bill would establish under local law an urban agricultural incentive zone fund that would be funded through conservation innovation grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other sources. It would also enable local governments to authorize incentives such as a property tax credit, a property tax rate freeze, and reduced rates for utility connections and service.

HB 156 would achieve its goals though the following steps:

- First an Urban Agricultural Incentive Zone Advisory Committee would be formed to determine the definitional standards and procedural steps they will use to approve the urban agricultural project applications.
- Second, interested farmers or partner organizations would apply to their local government for their project proposals to be reviewed by the Advisory Committee.
- Third, upon approval, a proposed area would be legally designated as an urban agricultural incentive zone by the local government or municipality under agreed circumstances.

HB 156 can help address a wide array of environmental and economic challenges that face conventional farming and food distribution systems. Transforming plots of urban wasteland into green farm areas increases air quality, reduces the damages caused by storm water runoff, supports the pollinators upon which our biodiversity depends, and can help connect our wildlife corridors. Urban agricultural zones can also help new entrants to farming that hope to try tier crop formations, bio nutrient recycling, integrated pest management, and other sustainable farming practices.

This bill sets up a system for urban farming that is transparent to the community and guided by the local community and government by way of the Urban Agricultural Incentive Zone Advisory Committee, which includes four community residents. In addition to potentially increasing employment opportunities for residents, urban agricultural zones can help meet the needs of their

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest [national] 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.

communities and their food systems networks, with reduced need for reliance on transportation networks.

We believe there can be significant benefits from adopting different business models for growing food. The recent pandemic emphasized how vital local food supplies can be. The establishment of urban agricultural zones proposed in HB 156 also offers benefits from supporting local governance and turning underutilized urban land into business opportunities to provide local food.

HB 156 will increase local jobs while promoting local agriculture as a community resource and shared asset by allowing local governments to shape a food production system with the health of a local community as its main goal. We ask for a favorable report.

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