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Committees: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: HB503 “Natural Resources – Greenspace Equity Program – Establishment

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 17, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB503. This bill establishes the Greenspace Equity Program in the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide grants to counties, municipalities, land trusts or nongovernmental organizations to implement projects to preserve, create, or enhance community greenspace that aims to benefit the public health and livability of overburdened and underserved communities.

Beginning in fiscal year 2025, the DNR would begin to issue grants under this program. Funding for the Greenspace Equity Program would be taken from existing Program Open Space funds. Grant money could be used for land acquisition, appraisals, environmental assessments, site clearance or development and other expenses related to planning and implementing a project, including stewardship of the site. The program would receive \$5 million in the first year, \$7 million in the second year, and \$10 million in each year thereafter. The Board of Public Works shall approve or deny proposed grants.

An eleven-member Greenspace Advisory Board will serve as a consultant to the DNR in the implementation of the program. It would consist of one State Senator appointed by the President of the Senate, one Delegate appointed by the Speaker of the House, and nine representatives appointed by the Governor.¹

Working with local communities, this grant program could be used to enhance, create or conserve urban and pocket parks, community gathering open space, community woodland and/or trails, green networks/wildlife corridors, community gardens, and urban farms. Enhanced and protected greenspaces are indispensable to people’s health, prosperity, traditions, and enjoyment. They would enhance public health and livability by improving air quality, providing places to socialize, and trails to use for multimodal transportation or exercise. Urban community gardens also absorb more stormwater than vacant lots (<https://www.nal.usda.gov/farms-and-agricultural-production-systems/urban-agriculture>).

Although urban farms play an important part in feeding communities they are frequently thwarted by gentrification and unpredictable leases.² Additionally, the purchase of land in urban areas is often more expensive, which is another reason the allocation of funds is warranted.

¹ These nine consist of representatives of a county department of parks and recreation, a municipal department of parks and recreation, the Maryland Environmental Trust, and a land trust working in an overburdened or underserved community; and five residents of overburdened or underserved communities who reflect the diversity of the state.

² Worth, P. (2022, March 5). [Black-led urban farms are thriving—until they have to fight for their land](#). *The Guardian*.

This program is urgently needed to add greenspaces to urban areas where they may not have been adequately and equitably preserved, created, and supported. We strongly urge a favorable report.

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