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Committees: Education, Energy, and the Environment

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

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 30, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB503 as amended and passed by the House, and we hope the Senate will pass SB923 in accordance with these amendments. This bill establishes the Greenspace Equity Advisory Board and the Greenspace Equity Program in the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide grants to counties, municipalities, or land trust organizations to implement projects to preserve, create, or enhance community greenspace that aims to enhance 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 due diligence expenses related to implementing a project. The program would receive up to \$5 million in the first year, up to \$7 million in the second year, and up to \$10 million in each year thereafter. The Maryland State Clearinghouse for Intergovernmental Assistance, subject to approval by the Board of Public Works, shall approve or deny proposed grants.

The Greenspace Advisory Board will serve as a consultant to the DNR in the implementation of the program and shall consist of one State Senator, one State Delegate, one representative each from a municipal and a county Department of Parks and Recreation, a representative from the Maryland Environmental Trust, a representative from a land trust working in an overburdened or underserved community and five residents of an overburdened or underserved community who reflect the diversity of the state.

Working with local communities, this grant program could be used to enhance, create or conserve urban and pocket parks, community gathering open space, interconnected greenspaces or corridors, community woodland and/or trails, 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 lots¹.

¹ <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 why the allocation of funds is needed.

This program is urgently needed to add greenspaces to urban areas where they may not have been adequately and equitably allotted. Many people depend on greenspaces in urban areas for health and recreation. We strongly urge a favorable report.

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