



**HOUSE ENVIRONMENT & TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
HB 807, 800, 791**

MARCH 10, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

Showing Up for Racial Justice is a national network of groups working to undermine white supremacy and working toward racial justice. The Montgomery County chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice represents the voices of over 1,500 people working locally for justice and equity.

We urge you to vote yes on HB 807, 800, and 791. These three bills would provide common sense governance reform of Montgomery County's Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC). HB 807 would make the chair of the commission more accountable to the public and align with best practices in other Maryland counties. HB 800 would increase HOC transparency by requiring them to make certain information public (such as live-streaming their meetings, posting audits, and disclosing payments). HB 791 would bring HOC's procurement procedures in line with County code.

As a result of the ongoing struggle to memorialize the Moses African Cemetery in Bethesda, which is currently operated as a parking lot for a property owned by HOC, we have learned about the disturbing mismanagement of this agency.

The current HOC board is an ineffective commission which merely rubber stamps anything put before them by the executive director. For example, at one meeting when they were voting to approve structure of payment vouchers for the following year, HOC commissioners questioned why the voucher amounts were fixed rather than increasing to match yearly increases in rents. The executive director brushed this off as just how things were. The commissioners then

unanimously voted to approve this despite the clear detriment to the low income people dependent on these housing vouchers.

HB 807 would bring HOC in line with best practices in other Maryland counties. It is important that the chair of HOC's board of commissioners be accountable to the public they serve, not merely HOC's executive staff.

We support all the requirements proposed in HB 800. None of the proposed requirements are radical ideas; they are the best practices of many local, state, and federal government offices. HOC has proven that it cannot be trusted to be transparent. They have failed to transmit their proposed annual budget to the county council, despite being required to do so. They have on multiple occasions demanded fees of over \$2000 to hand over information requested through the Maryland Public Information Act. They need oversight.

The lack of oversight over HOC's procurement process is truly appalling. They spent \$20.5 million of our taxpayer dollars to knowingly purchase the bodies of 500 Africans and continue the desecration of a sacred burial site, with disgustingly little oversight by the county government. While HB 791 may not have prevented that deplorable decision, it would bring HOC's procurement rules in line with other county agencies. When an agency is spending millions of taxpayer dollars, their decisions ought to be vetted and approved.

These bills are not enough to rectify the serious mismanagement issues at HOC, but they are a welcome start to making this agency more accountable to the public it serves. An agency dedicated to affordable housing is extremely important to the most vulnerable residents in a jurisdiction, and this agency has been failing its mission and needs structural changes.

As residents of Montgomery County, we support these bills and urge you to vote yes on HB 807, 800, and 791. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

For these reasons, Showing Up for Racial Justice – Montgomery County supports HB 807, 800, and 791.

For more information, contact:

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