

February 18, 2020

Testimony on HB 421**State Government – Open Meetings – Requirements and Application of Open Meetings Act (Maryland State Agency Transparency Act)
Health and Government Operations****Position: Favorable w/ Amendments**

Common Cause Maryland support HB 421 which would significantly increase access to and the efficiency of several State agencies meeting processes by requiring that meeting agendas and minutes be made available online. Also, that meetings be made publicly available by live stream.

Streaming video and online access to meeting materials are easy and efficient ways to enhance Marylanders' access to agencies throughout the State. This access and transparency is particularly necessary for agencies like the Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA) who is responsible for constructing, managing, operating and improving the State's toll facilities, as well as for financing new revenue producing transportation projects. Also, agencies like the State Board of Elections (SBE) who oversee the process most fundamental to our democracy: elections. As MDTA continues to announce new projects and SBE prepares for upcoming elections, it is important that Marylanders are able to have access to meetings where decision made will impact them and their communities.

For too many citizens, the work done by MDTA and SBE is a distant and often undecipherable series of activities. Many Marylanders are unable to go to meeting locations in person but have a strongly vested interest in the policies and decisions being made by these agencies. For those who can attend meetings, they are often don't have access to meeting agendas and at times travel only to be met with closed sessions.

As technology makes information in all its forms more readily available, Maryland should continue seeking ways to utilize these technologies to increase accessibility to information across the state. The technology to live-stream is inexpensive, widespread, and allows all Marylanders to participate. We recommend the committee also consider requiring agencies archive this video footage for at least one year. Activities in the form of written meeting minutes is simply not open and transparent enough. An archive would ensure those who are unable to watch the live stream have access to the footage.

Because HB 421 would vastly increase Marylanders' access to the open meetings of the Maryland agencies, we urge the committee to report favorably.