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Committee: Budget & Taxation
Testimony on: SB199 – “Transit Safety & Investment Act”
Position: Support
Hearing Date: January 20, 2021

The Maryland Sierra Club strongly supports SB 199, one of our priority bills for this session.

The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) operates local buses, commuter buses, light rail, MARC, and paratransit, and provides funding to locally operated transit systems in every Maryland county, Baltimore City, Annapolis, and Ocean City. This legislation would require the funding necessary to meet the MTA’s capital needs from the Transportation Trust Fund, from 2023 to 2028, and also allows these funds to be available for Maryland’s locally operated transit systems.

In July 2019, MTA released its first ever Capital Needs Inventory (CNI) to assess its ongoing, unconstrained capital needs. The CNI identified \$5.7 billion of capital needs over the next ten years, \$1.5 billion of which is an accumulated backlog of deferred maintenance. The appropriation proposed by this legislation would increase capital funding for MTA over the CTP’s proposed levels to \$500 million annually to address this maintenance backlog to bring the system into a state of good repair, so that it can operate safely and reliably. The bill also would address enhancements identified by the CNI needed to improve access to MARC and bus stations, expand bus shelters, and promote sustainability efforts.

The result of neglected maintenance is that buses, light rail vehicles, subway trains and MARC commuter trains MTA services break down more often than those of peer agencies, and in some cases more often than any transit agency in the nation. This means that far too often riders are late or simply stranded. Paratransit services continue to malfunction, resulting in riders with disabilities missing dialysis or health appointments and being stranded when paratransit is late or fails to appear. This burden of an unsafe and unreliable transit falls hardest on communities of color, low income communities, and people with disabilities. One in three transit riders in the state are also essential workers. The lack of a reliable system makes it harder for these vital workers to get to their jobs, threatens their employment, and makes economic recovery from COVID-19 more difficult.

Transportation is the largest source of climate pollution in Maryland. Investing in public transit provides critically needed transportation for those without cars and is an essential part of the state’s efforts to reduce climate, air, and water pollution by reducing Marylanders’ reliance on gasoline-powered cars. A person who commutes 20 miles daily round trip by car could lower their carbon footprint 4,800 pounds annually, equivalent to the emissions from 245 gallons of gasoline, if they instead made that trip each day on public transit.

Properly funding MTA’s capital needs is critical to tackling climate-disrupting pollution and ensuring that people can use transit safely and reliably to get to jobs, education, healthcare, recreation, and other destinations each and every day. We urge a favorable report on SB 199.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.