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Committee: Judicial Proceedings

Testimony on: HB322 “Real Property – Restrictions on Use – Low-Impact Landscaping”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 17, 2021

The Maryland Sierra Club submits this testimony in support of HB322, which would prohibit in certain private legal instruments the imposition of “unreasonable limitations” (as defined in the bill) on low-impact landscaping, such as rain gardens, pollinator gardens and xeriscaping. This bill would allow homeowners and condominium owners more flexibility in installing and maintaining landscaping that supports biodiversity and storm water management, while at the same time requiring less water and pesticides in general maintenance.

Today, when we face the threat of substantial loss of biodiversity, human beings can no longer divide the land into two categories: land meant for people and land meant for wildlife. We must learn to share. Our yards can provide food and shelter for wildlife while at the same time appeal to our aesthetic sense of design and beauty.

Simple changes such as the reduction of turf grass and the addition of native trees, shrubs and plants will increase sustainability and resilience by building healthy soil which will soak up floodwaters, thus lessening flooding. Additionally, native plants require the use of less fertilizer and pesticides. This will result in less polluted runoff which will restore the health of our waterways, many of which feed into the Chesapeake Bay.

Reducing the area of turf grass will also reduce the need for mowing and leaf blowers. This is important because fossil fuel powered lawn equipment releases much more pollutants than one would expect because they do not have emission control devices. The EPA estimates that hour-per-hour gasoline powered lawn mowers release 11 times more pollution than a new car.

Homeowners’ Associations, which control thousands of acres of land across Maryland, often require the installation of turf grass, and also prevent the implementation of raingardens and native plants. If this bill is passed, homeowners will become empowered to follow the many recommendations of ecologists and other scientists to use their yards to nurture wildlife and help mitigate storm water pollution and the downstream damage of flooding and contamination.

A yard that contains less turf grass and more native plants can be beautiful. With intentionally chosen and maintained native plants, a yard can have colorful flowers, interesting evergreens, and tall trees. When native plants flower they attract beneficial pollinators like butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees. When native trees and shrubs bear fruit, they attract birds. These features are not only enchanting, but they connect people to nature. In fact, there are many successful programs which encourage homeowners to designate their yards as wildlife- or pollinator-friendly habitat. Often this designation is proudly displayed on a sign in the owner’s yard.

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.

Low impact landscaping can lead to more trees planted, more native plants, thriving wildlife, more food plants, cleaner air, and cleaner water. We urge the Committee to report HB322 favorably.

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