

Maryland General Assembly

March 9, 2021

Committee: House | Ways and Means

Bill: HB 1120 - "Property Tax – Special Use Assessment of Country Clubs and Golf Courses – Repeal"

Name: Frank Santos Fritz

City: Silver Spring, MD

Position: **In Favor**

I would like to recognize that we meet on the ancestral lands of the Piscataway Conoy tribe, the rightful past, present, and future inhabitants of the land I sit upon. I would like to further acknowledge that this state and this country were built with the stolen labor enslaved African people. While land acknowledgements are only the beginning, I aim to bring a racial and environmental justice lens to this policy discussion.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wisely noted that in the United States of America we have "socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor," and those words are truer than ever in our current moment. I wonder what Dr. King would think of this over 50 year old tax break given to segregated country clubs outside our nation's capital to integrate their exclusive facilities.

It is long overdue that the state of Maryland end the irrational economic embarrassment and graft that is the so-called "special use" property tax assessment for the exclusive, elite country clubs and golf courses across our state to invest in our priorities of narrowing racial disparities in our society, fighting for a livable climate, and guaranteeing every Maryland child a world-class education.

In Montgomery County alone, this subsidy will disinvest \$10 million a year or over \$100 million in the next decade from our local government. That handout to these exclusive clubs is equal to nearly a quarter of our county's \$46.8 million public recreation budget. That money could be used to **double** the budget for recreational youth development programs, (\$9,365,360 in FY 21) or nearly **quadruple** the county budget for elder and senior resident programming (FY21-\$2,684,077).

What is the racial equity impact of favoring elite clubs over the public services in our majority-minority communities? Do we have a moral responsibility to invest in the safe reopening of our schools in a way that fights, not reinforces, racial inequities from historic injustices?

We currently give taxpayer dollars to the destruction of our environment for luxury private recreation, as the clubs utilize pesticides and fertilizers that poison our creeks, rivers, bays, and other waterways and consume massive amounts of clean water. Instead we could immediately cut bus fares for Montgomery County Ride-On buses **in half** or make the system **free for 50% of riders** boosting the public transit we need to fight climate change and reduce congestion on our highways.

As fixed assets, golf courses and country clubs derive their value from the larger communities in which they exist. If a private club cannot exist without taxpayer subsidy we should look at socially and economically beneficial uses for that land such as mixed-use development for housing and new businesses that make our community more, not less inclusive and generate revenues to support the world class public services that draw people to Maryland in the first place.

I do not need to tell you that budgets are statements of our values. What will you say to future generations, when they ask how we spent our finite resources in this historic moment. It is time to stop defending the privilege of the few to pay less in taxes than working families on their luxury recreation. On this bill you have a simple choice, re-invest in the people of the state of Maryland for better education, racial justice, and a livable planet or continue to protect the privilege and power that has brought us to our current crises.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.