

February 21, 2022

Chairman Kumar Barve and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee
House Office Building
6 Bladen St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

House Bill 596 – Environmental Human Rights Amendment

Position: **FAVORABLE**

Dear Chairman Barve and Committee Members:

The undersigned groups representing diverse communities of faith in Maryland testify our support of House Bill 596 to amend our constitution with an Environmental Human Rights Amendment.

All people have a fundamental right to clean air, clean water, unpolluted soil, and a stable climate. Period. A healthy environment is essential for all life and thus should be on equal footing with all other rights. At the time Maryland's Constitution was written, its drafters could not fathom that the clean water or clean air would be threatened in the ways it is today. **It is our responsibility to ensure the Maryland Constitutions protects the rights of Marylanders today.**

Sacrifice zones are immoral and an abuse of power, and are where oppressed communities disproportionately bear the burden of unwanted waste and pollution. It becomes a moral issue when our state chooses to put the interests of industry over the health of its citizens, especially of marginalized communities. This amendment would establish basic rights for all people to sound the alarm and stop this abuse in their neighborhoods.

In the Kresson neighborhood in Baltimore, there are dangerous remnants from decommissioned transformers¹ amid a host of industrial sites situated right in the middle of a residential neighborhood. This community is 61% Hispanic², with 22% of children living below the poverty line³, and 47% of residents having less than a high school degree⁴. There are examples of this sort of environmental injustice throughout Maryland, from abandoned brownfields in Baltimore, to polluting power plants in Prince George's County, to polluted well water in Salisbury. **Environmental laws often fail vulnerable communities. An enshrined right to a healthy environment would empower communities to fight for the Maryland we all know is possible.**

Opponents of this bill will argue that regulations already protect the environment, or if they are flawed, there are processes in place to strengthen existing laws. However, new harmful chemicals emerge all the time (a prime example being forever chemicals called per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances, commonly referred to as "PFAS"), but it can take years for regulations to be enacted and the damage is already done. Well-designed regulations go unenforced, leaving the burden to citizens to fight on their own. Companies go bankrupt, leaving a trail of destruction in their path that taxpayers must deal with. **This bill would level the playing field for citizens to pursue their rights, even when Maryland's laws fail them.**

¹ Glenn Ross, neighborhood advocate and organizer of "Toxic Tours" in Baltimore,

<https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/take-a-toxic-tour-of-baltimores-scariest-environmental-problems/>

² 2020 Census Preliminary Demographics Data Explorer by Neighborhood Statistical Area, Baltimore City Department of Planning Policy & Data Analysis Division

³ Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance

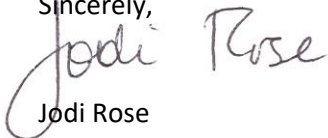
⁴ Baltimore City Planning Department's Neighborhood Profile using American Community Statistical data:

<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/KRESSON.PDF>

As chairman of the Environment and Transportation Committee, you have the ability to bring the Environmental Human Rights Amendment before the legislature this year. We ask you to move forward on HB 596 so that all Marylanders have a right to a healthy and clean environment with clean air and water.

It was wonderful of you to speak at our Celebrate Chesapeake Champions event at the Maritime Museum last summer where we talked about these very same liberties. Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake and our partners stand ready to work with you on all matters of Environmental Justice.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Jodi Rose".

Jodi Rose
Executive Director
Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake
7 Willow Street, 2nd Floor
Annapolis, MD 21401

Additional Signers:

Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home
Bob Simon, Co-Chair
Counties surrounding Washington DC

St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
Annapolis, MD
Rev. Peter Mayer, Rector
Rev. Patti Sachs, Associate Rector

Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church
Mike Koob, Chair, Creation Care Action & Advocacy Team

Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD
Lee McNair, Co-Chair, Environmental Justice Ministry

Multifaith Alliance of Climate Stewards of Frederick County (MACS)
Bernadette Roche, Co-Chair

Oseh Shalom Congregation
Laurel, MD
Dr. Andrew Lincoln, Co-President

Interfaith Power & Light - DMV
Joelle Novey, Executive Director
Statewide Organization

All Saints Lutheran Church
Bowie, MD
Rev. Angela Shannon, Pastor
Emily Demarco, Just Grace Social Justice Team

Green Muslims
Sevim Kalyoncu, Executive Director
Statewide Organization

Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation
Bethesda, MD
Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb