



Senator Guy Guzzone, Chair
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
3 West Senate Miller Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Senate Bill 14 – Economic Development – Tourism Zones – Designation and Benefits – SUPPORT

January 17, 2024

Dear Chairman Guzzone and Committee Members:

On behalf of myself and the board members for the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad, located in Cumberland, Maryland, we would like to take this opportunity offer our support to **Senate Bill 14, entitled: “Economic Development – Tourism Zones – Designation and Benefits.”**

WMSR is a scenic railroad initially created to serve as a tourist destination to draw visitors to Allegany County and the surrounding cities of Cumberland and Frostburg. The organization has been in operation for thirty-five years and has emerged as a significant economic driver for the entire region. Lead by the historic steam locomotive No. 1309, this train serves as an economic engine to attract visitors and regional citizenry to Western Maryland.

Within the last, three years, the Railroad has experienced record-breaking revenues, increased ridership, and cultivated new local relations and partnerships. In the COVID- recovery years, the railroad experienced unprecedented ridership growth due to our focus on branding, community, philanthropy, and sharing our historic experience with families from across the globe. totaling over 47,000 in 2021 and completed 2023 with almost 75,000 visitors in Allegany County this year.

The successful growth of the Railroad extends beyond Canal Place. The City of Cumberland has witnessed, firsthand, surrounding restaurants and other local businesses directly benefitting from the Railroad’s tireless efforts in making this organization one of the centerpieces in downtown Cumberland. According to the *VisitMaryland.org*, the Railroad’s provides approximately \$17 million in economic impact to the State of Maryland, annually. Last week, the Railroad received an award for Favorite Tourism Attraction in 2023 by Allegany Magazine.

While these milestones have been encouraging, the viability of the Railroad still needs the support and financial assistance from the State of Maryland on an ongoing, annual basis. Concurrent rising operational and capital expenditures are constant and can cripple the organization’s success and growth at any moment.

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The creation of a potential tourism zone in downtown Cumberland through the enactment of Senate Bill 14, would offer tremendous financial relief to the Railroad. Moreover, the money saved through these tax exemptions will provide our organization with a means to offset our operational expenditures and continue to reinvest it back into our staff and equipment.

Most importantly, the passage of SB14 will assist the Railroad to remain a valuable economic driver to the area while providing cultural and historic destinations for both visitors and local Marylanders to enjoy. It is for these reasons that we respectfully urge this committee to give Senate Bill 14 a **FAVORABLE** vote.

Should you have any questions or require additional background about this non-profit, please don't hesitate to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,



Wes Heinz
Executive Director
Western MD Scenic Railroad