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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

January 30, 2026

The Honorable Jheanelle Wilkins  
Ways and Means Committee  
130 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support: House Bill 161 - Property Tax Credit - Retail Service Station Conversions

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 161 - Property Tax Credit – Retail Service Station Conversions.** This bill encourages the repurposing of underutilized properties, potentially leading to revitalized communities and more efficient land use. It allows local governments, including Baltimore City and counties, to grant property tax credits on real properties converted from retail service stations to other uses. Additionally, the bill authorizes the state to reimburse participating local jurisdictions for 50% of the forgone property tax revenue resulting from these credits, as specified in the state budget. This incentivizes the conversion of vacant properties and promotes community development.

House Bill 161 benefits rural areas by providing property tax credits for converting underutilized retail service stations into alternative uses, thereby driving revitalization in these communities. Many rural areas have abandoned or underdeveloped properties, and this bill encourages redevelopment that can attract new businesses or services to those locations. It incentivizes property revitalization by encouraging the transformation of unused or abandoned retail service stations into productive uses, which can help revitalize rural areas and make better use of existing properties. The bill supports local economic growth by creating opportunities for new businesses and job creation, which is particularly beneficial in rural communities that may struggle with economic activity and development. Additionally, repurposing retail service stations can lead to improvements in local infrastructure and services, such as new retail establishments, community centers, or essential services.

By promoting these conversions in rural areas, the bill helps ensure more efficient use of land, encourages community development, and can stimulate local economies. **The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of House Bill 161.**

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

February 10, 2026

The Honorable Heather Bagnall  
Health Committee  
240 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support: House Bill 202 - Public Health - Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program - Establishment

Dear Chair Bagnall, Vice Chair Cullison, and Members of the Health Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council House Bill 202 - Public Health - Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program – Establishment.** House Bill 202 establishes the Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program within the Maryland Department of Health to support community-based programs that reduce social isolation and loneliness. The bill requires a \$100,000 appropriation in the fiscal year 2028 budget and takes effect on October 1, 2026. This pilot program allows the State to invest in initiatives that strengthen social connections and improve well-being for vulnerable populations.

Addressing social isolation is an important public health strategy, as loneliness is linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes, including depression and increased health care utilization. By supporting programs that foster social connection and socio-emotional support, HB 202 can improve quality of life while helping prevent more costly health interventions.

This bill is especially relevant for rural Maryland, where distance, limited transportation, and fewer local resources can make social isolation more severe. Rural communities often depend on small nonprofits, senior centers, libraries, and faith-based organizations to provide social connection, yet these groups frequently operate with limited funding. The grant program created by HB 202 would help sustain and expand these vital community supports.

House Bill 202 takes a responsible, pilot-based approach that allows the State to evaluate impact before scaling up. By investing in locally driven solutions, including those in rural areas, Maryland can better address social isolation statewide.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 202.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 272 – Food Establishments – Lavatory Requirement  
and On-Farm Food Service Facility License  
Health Committee  
February 4, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 272 – Food Establishments – Lavatory Requirement and On-Farm Food Service Facility License**. This bill modernizes public health and licensing requirements for agritourism and on-farm food service operations by providing practical flexibility while maintaining essential health protections.

Maryland's agritourism industry is a growing economic driver, with more than 300 farms generating over \$162 million in annual economic impact and supporting more than 1,000 jobs statewide. In 2022, 354 farms reported \$14.5 million in agritourism income, up from \$9.9 million in 2017, while direct-to-consumer sales reached \$55.7 million. Many of these operations are small, family-owned farms that rely on agritourism and on-farm food service as a critical source of supplemental income, underscoring the need for regulatory frameworks like House Bill 272 that support growth while reflecting the seasonal and rural nature of farm-based operations. (Source: University of Maryland Eastern Shore Extension, Maryland Agritourism Industry Baseline Report, 2023.)

The bill allows certain agritourism operations, limited wineries, and farm breweries to meet lavatory requirements through properly sited portable toilet facilities. This approach accommodates the seasonal and outdoor nature of many farm-based businesses and reduces unnecessary infrastructure costs while preserving public health through clear siting standards. In addition, HB 272 creates a new on-farm food service facility license, providing a clear and affordable pathway for farms serving food. By capping the annual license fee at \$100 and directing the Maryland Department of Health to develop tailored regulations in consultation with relevant agencies, the bill balances effective oversight with economic practicality.

The Rural Maryland Council is committed to strengthening the economic viability of Maryland's farms and rural communities. Agritourism and value-added agricultural activities, including on-farm food service, provide critical supplemental income, support local food systems, and increase public engagement with agriculture. Regulations designed for permanent urban establishments often create unduly burdensome barriers for farm-based businesses; HB 272 replaces these with a framework better suited to rural operations.

By reducing regulatory uncertainty, supporting responsible growth in agritourism, and promoting farm viability, House Bill 272 promotes economic development, public health, and long-term resilience in rural Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of **House Bill 272**.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 390/ Senate Bill 282 - Budget Bill (Fiscal Year 2027)  
Appropriations Committee  
Capital Budget Subcommittee  
Thursday, February 26, 2026

**The Rural Maryland Council respectfully supports the Governor's appropriation for the Rural Maryland Council and the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund contained in House Bill 390/ Senate Bill 282 - Budget Bill (Fiscal Year 2027).** To meet statewide demand and generate meaningful impact across rural Maryland, the Council believes \$9 million represents the appropriate funding level. However, we recognize and appreciate the fiscal realities facing the State and accept the proposed \$6 million appropriation in FY2027 as level funding under current budget conditions.

The funds allocated in the FY2027 budget will support the Rural Maryland Council's operations and activities; the Council's two grant programs - the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF) and the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF); and provides vital capacity and programming to the State's five Rural Regional Councils.

These funds are essential to helping rural communities recover and grow at a pace comparable to the rest of Maryland. The programs support economic development, health care access, workforce training, food security, broadband expansion, and critical community infrastructure across rural regions of the State. Demand for these programs continues to far exceed available resources.

In FY2026, the Council received 170 applications requesting more than \$14 million in funding. Due to limited resources, the Council was only able to fund 62 projects totaling \$5,468,485.

In FY2025, the Council received 204 applications totaling \$19,834,402. The Council awarded 65 grants totaling \$6,129,837. Although the Council was appropriated \$9 million in FY2025, a \$2.25 million reduction was made by the Board of Public Works in July 2024.

Despite funding constraints, the outcomes of these investments are significant. Grant recipients have:

- Improved educational outcomes for at-risk and minority youth through summer enrichment programming
- Addressed food insecurity by supporting infrastructure to establish local grocery access
- Expanded broadband connections to new homes
- Provided medical transportation, personnel, and essential health services

From 2018 to 2024, the Rural Maryland Council's grant programs generated:

- \$301.2 million in economic output
- 2,152 jobs supported
- More than \$102 million in wages paid

This is more than data - it represents real growth, real jobs, and measurable return on investment for the State of Maryland.

The Council is grateful for the proposed \$6 million appropriation in the FY2027 budget and appreciates the Administration's continued investment in rural Maryland during a challenging fiscal environment.

In addition, the Council is a designated subrecipient to advance a 'Food as Health' initiative through the Maryland Department of Health's Rural Health Transformation Program. This initiative will focus on increasing access to healthy, locally sourced food by supporting regional aggregation and developing a coordinated purchasing strategy to strengthen local supply chains. To implement this initiative effectively, the Council will request a supplemental budget adjustment once the total award amount is finalized.

The strength of the Council's impact is directly tied to the resources provided through the State's operating budget. Council members and rural nonprofit partners leverage these State funds with local and federal investments to expand opportunity and improve the lives of rural Marylanders.

The Rural Maryland Council thanks Governor Moore for his continued support and respectfully requests your favorable support of the Governor's appropriation included in House Bill 390.

*The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county, and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county, and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.*

**"A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland"**



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

February 11, 2026

The Honorable Marc Korman  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
250 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 395 - Water Pollution Control - Discharge Permits - Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 395 - Water Pollution Control - Discharge Permits - Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. This bill clarifies Maryland law regarding discharge permits for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) by removing the requirement that a general discharge permit be obtained prior to the commencement of construction. House Bill 395 maintains all existing water pollution control standards while ensuring that agricultural producers are not subject to duplicative or premature permitting requirements before a facility is operational.

By aligning the timing of permitting with actual discharge risk, House Bill 395 supports Maryland's agricultural community, particularly in rural regions where livestock and poultry operations are central to the local economy. For many farm families, especially on the Eastern Shore and in other rural counties, upfront permitting requirements can delay projects, increase costs, and create uncertainty for lenders and contractors. This legislation helps streamline the process while preserving the State's authority to regulate discharges once an operation begins and is subject to environmental oversight.

This approach is not only beneficial for individual producers but also strengthens rural economies more broadly. Agriculture supports thousands of jobs in processing, transportation, equipment sales, construction, and feed supply. When farmers can modernize or expand their operations efficiently, it stimulates economic activity throughout surrounding communities. Reducing unnecessary regulatory barriers can help ensure that Maryland farms remain competitive with operations in neighboring states, preventing the loss of agricultural investment and jobs across state lines.

Furthermore, House Bill 395 reinforces a balanced regulatory framework by maintaining environmental protections under Maryland's Water Pollution Control laws while improving clarity and predictability in the permitting process. By preserving water quality standards and enforcement authority, the bill allows the State to continue protecting local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay, while also recognizing the operational realities faced by farmers. This measured adjustment promotes both environmental stewardship and agricultural viability, ensuring that rural Maryland can remain economically strong and environmentally responsible for the long term.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 395.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support with Amendments

House Bill 460 - Solar Energy - Construction of Generating Stations in Priority Preservation Areas and Study  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 10, 2026

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 460 with Amendments** - Solar Energy - Construction of Generating Stations in Priority Preservation Areas and Study, which takes an important step toward balancing Maryland's renewable energy goals with the protection of agricultural and conservation lands. The bill reduces the percentage of priority preservation area acreage eligible for certain solar energy generating stations from 5% to 2% and directs the Maryland Department of the Environment to study the environmental impacts associated with the disposal of solar photovoltaic systems.

Maryland's transition to renewable energy is essential, but it must be pursued in a manner that respects the purpose of priority preservation areas. These lands were designated to protect farmland, support agricultural economies, and preserve rural landscapes. Allowing excessive development of large-scale solar facilities in these areas risks permanently removing productive agricultural land from use and undermining long-term land preservation efforts.

Rural communities are frequently asked to host energy infrastructure due to their available land and proximity to natural resources. While rural Maryland can play a role in supporting clean energy generation, this role should not come at the expense of agricultural sustainability or local land-use priorities. By limiting solar development in priority preservation areas, House Bill 460 encourages more appropriate siting decisions while maintaining the integrity of preserved farmland.

The Rural Maryland Council requests an amendment to ensure that the bill explicitly requires a study of the environmental impacts of solar photovoltaic systems. Evaluating potential effects related to installation, operation, and end-of-life management will help ensure that Maryland's renewable energy expansion proceeds in an environmentally responsible and sustainable manner.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support with amendments of House Bill 460.

HB0460

Proposed Amendments

AMENDMENT No. 1

On page 2, in Section 2, after “AT THE END OF THEIR LIFE CYCLE,” insert:

**“, as well as the environmental impacts of solar photovoltaic systems throughout their life cycle”.**



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 461 - Economic Development - Rural Readiness Program and  
Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund – Establishment  
Economic Matters Committee  
February 17, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports House Bill 461 – Economic Development – Rural Readiness Program and Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund.** This legislation establishes the Rural Readiness Program within the Rural Maryland Council to assist small towns and small nonprofit organizations that lack the capacity to compete for funding and implement community and economic development projects. The bill also creates a dedicated capacity-building fund to support early planning and predevelopment activities and authorizes the Council to certify program participants and provide priority consideration in Rural Maryland Council grant funding decisions.

Rural communities face unique structural challenges that limit their ability to successfully pursue funding opportunities and carry out development initiatives. These challenges include smaller tax bases; limited access to critical infrastructure such as broadband and transportation; difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled staff to manage projects; fewer social and professional networks to support collaboration; and aging populations coupled with the outmigration of younger residents. Without targeted capacity-building support, these barriers contribute to persistent disparities in healthcare access, educational opportunity, infrastructure investment, and economic growth across rural Maryland.

The Rural Readiness Program is designed to address these challenges by providing early-stage planning support that helps communities become better positioned to compete for state, federal, and philanthropic funding. The program would operate as a pilot reimbursement grant program administered by the Rural Maryland Council, offering grants of up to \$50,000 per community. Through direct Council staff assistance, community assessments, and flexible planning funds, participating communities would be able to develop strategic plans, feasibility studies, market analyses, and other foundational work necessary to advance high-quality projects.

Eligible applicants under HB 461 include tax-exempt organizations, local units of government, state-recognized Tribes, institutions of higher education, and regional planning, economic, or workforce development organizations. State agencies and for-profit entities seeking operational staffing support or proposing non-rural projects are not eligible. By focusing resources on rural communities with demonstrated need, the program ensures that limited funds are directed where they can have the greatest impact.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

By strengthening local capacity and prioritizing readiness, House Bill 461 will improve the quality, competitiveness, and long-term success of rural development projects. This investment will help rural communities plan more effectively, leverage additional funding, and implement initiatives that support economic growth, job creation, and improved quality of life across rural Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of House Bill 461.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 533 - Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund - Reporting  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 18, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports House Bill 533 - Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund - Reporting**. This bill strengthens legislative oversight and transparency by requiring the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide detailed annual reporting on the use of funds credited to the Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund. Specifically, HB 533 requires DNR to report on how fund revenues are used, the amount of agricultural land transfer tax proceeds distributed to the fund from woodland-only property transfers, and any uncertainties regarding those distributions.

The Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund plays an important role in supporting Maryland's forestry workforce and woodland stewardship efforts. Clear and consistent reporting ensures that funds intended to support forestry incentives and professional development programs are properly tracked, fully allocated, and used as intended. Increased transparency also helps policymakers identify funding gaps, resolve uncertainties, and make informed decisions that support long-term workforce and conservation goals.

Maryland's forestry industry is a vital component of the State's rural economy. A recent economic impact study by BEACON at Salisbury University, conducted with support from the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), found that forestry contributes more than \$4.1 billion to Maryland's economy, represents nearly 14% of resource-based industry activity, supports over 14,000 jobs statewide, and generates more than \$139 million in State and local tax revenue. Ensuring accountability in programs that support this industry is critical to maintaining its economic strength and sustainability.

As demand for forestry education, workforce development, and woodland incentive programs continues to grow, accurate reporting is essential to ensure that available resources are maximized and directed where they are most needed. HB 533 provides the General Assembly with the information necessary to evaluate program effectiveness and ensure that revenues dedicated to forestry initiatives are fully and appropriately utilized.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests a favorable report on HB 533.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 535 - Food Establishments - Cottage Food Businesses - Maximum Annual Revenue  
Health Committee  
February 17, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports HB 535 - Food Establishments - Cottage Food Businesses - Maximum Annual Revenue**. HB 535 updates Maryland's cottage food law by increasing the allowable annual revenue for a cottage food business from \$50,000 to \$100,000. This change reflects current economic conditions and provides small, home-based food businesses with a realistic opportunity to grow without immediately facing the costs and barriers associated with transitioning to a commercial kitchen.

Cottage food businesses operate from residential kitchens and are limited to producing specific, low-risk food products. These include shelf-stable items such as baked goods, candies, jams, jellies, and other non-potentially hazardous foods that do not require refrigeration for safety. The scope of allowable products is intentionally narrow, ensuring that public health protections remain in place while allowing small-scale food production.

For many rural Marylanders, cottage food businesses provide an accessible path to entrepreneurship where commercial kitchens, retail space, and economic opportunities may be limited or geographically distant. These businesses allow individuals to generate income locally, support community events and farmers' markets, and strengthen rural economies without requiring significant upfront investment.

Cottage food operators typically sell directly to consumers from their homes, at farmers' markets and public events, through personal or mail delivery, or to retail food stores as permitted under current law. Despite remaining residential in nature, many of these businesses reach the existing revenue cap due to increased costs and growing demand, rather than because they are operating at a commercial scale.

Raising the revenue cap to \$100,000 will allow rural and small-town cottage food businesses to grow responsibly, reinvest in their operations, and better support the individuals and families who depend on them. HB 535 supports rural entrepreneurship, strengthens local food systems, and acknowledges the realities faced by small producers while maintaining Maryland's food safety standards.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 535.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 542 - Earned Income Tax Credit - Individuals Without Qualifying Children – Eligibility  
Ways and Means Committee  
February 12, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports House Bill 542 - Earned Income Tax Credit - Individuals Without Qualifying Children – Eligibility**. This bill expands eligibility for the Maryland Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for individuals without qualifying children. This legislation adjusts the income thresholds at which the state EITC phases out for individuals without qualifying children and ensures that, beginning after the 2025 tax year, these income thresholds and phase-out amounts are adjusted annually for inflation. The changes proposed in this bill will apply to all taxable years beginning after December 31, 2025, with an effective date of July 1, 2026.

By expanding eligibility for the EITC, House Bill 542 offers critical financial relief to hardworking Marylanders who are employed yet still struggling to make ends meet. Extending eligibility to include individuals without qualifying children recognizes the valuable contributions of all workers, regardless of family status, and encourages workforce participation by allowing more individuals to receive meaningful tax relief.

Expanding eligibility also has positive impacts beyond individual households by supporting local economies. When individuals receive greater financial resources through tax credits, they are more likely to spend that money in their communities, increasing demand for goods and services and stimulating economic activity. This effect is particularly important for small and rural businesses throughout Maryland.

Crucially, this bill also promotes fairness in the tax system. Under current federal and state EITC rules, workers without children have a significantly lower income threshold and smaller credit amounts compared to taxpayers with children. By raising the eligibility thresholds and indexing them for inflation over time, Senate Bill 377 moves Maryland toward a more equitable tax structure that supports a broader range of working individuals.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 542.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 578 - Fish and Wildlife - Endangered and Threatened Species and Migratory Birds -  
Regulations, Lists, Petitions, Essential Habitats, and Takings  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 18, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports House Bill 578 - Fish and Wildlife - Endangered and Threatened Species and Migratory Birds - Regulations, Lists, Petitions, Essential Habitats, and Takings**. House Bill 578 updates Maryland's endangered and threatened species law by establishing a clear, science-based framework for reviewing species listings, regulations, and essential habitat designations. The bill authorizes the Department of Natural Resources to periodically evaluate existing regulations, consider updated scientific data, and ensure that protections remain appropriate, effective, and transparent.

Maryland's current statute provides important protection for endangered and threatened species, but many of its regulatory components have not been systematically reviewed in decades. HB 578 creates a predictable process for reassessing those protections, including the criteria used for listing and delisting species and the information required when petitions are submitted. This approach strengthens conservation by ensuring decisions are based on the best available science and current conditions on the ground.

The bill also benefits landowners, businesses, and local governments by improving clarity and consistency. When regulations are clearly defined and regularly reviewed, regulated communities are better able to plan projects, manage land responsibly, and comply with the law. HB 578 helps avoid outdated or duplicative requirements that may no longer serve conservation goals, while preserving strong safeguards for species that truly need them.

Land use decisions and wildlife conservation are closely linked in Maryland. Forests, farms, and working lands provide critical habitat for many species, but they also support thousands of jobs and contribute billions of dollars to the state's economy. By encouraging cooperation between the Department of Natural Resources and stakeholders, HB 578 promotes conservation strategies that protect wildlife while recognizing the practical realities of land management.

Healthy ecosystems depend not only on protection, but on active, informed management. Regulations that reflect current science and local conditions are more likely to result in meaningful conservation outcomes. HB 578 advances this goal by modernizing Maryland's endangered species framework and ensuring it remains effective, credible, and balanced.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 578.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 595 – Income Tax – Credit for Physician Preceptors in Areas With Health Care Workforce Shortages  
Ways and Means Committee  
February 12, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 595 – Income Tax – Credit for Physician Preceptors in Areas With Health Care Workforce Shortages**. HB 595 would expand and improve the existing Preceptor Tax Credit Program by altering eligibility for a State income tax credit for physician preceptors in designated health care workforce shortage areas. The bill removes the requirement that students in a physician preceptorship must be enrolled in a Maryland medical school or training program and reduces the number of required hours for a preceptor rotation in community-based clinical training, making the credit more accessible and responsive to current workforce needs. The bill applies to taxable years beginning after December 31, 2025.

The Preceptor Tax Credit Program was created to strengthen Maryland's health care workforce by encouraging licensed professionals to serve as preceptors, providing critical, hands-on clinical learning experiences in underserved areas. Currently, the program authorizes a tax credit against State income tax for individuals, including physicians, who serve without compensation as preceptors in defined preceptorship programs and work in areas with health care workforce shortages. A qualifying preceptorship pairs a medical student or nurse practitioner student with a licensed physician or nurse practitioner for structured clinical training.

Maryland continues to face health care workforce shortages, especially in rural and medically underserved areas. Encouraging preceptorships through tax incentives increases the number of trained clinicians and supports retention of providers who understand and serve community needs. By broadening eligibility and reducing barriers to participation, HB 595 will help more physicians serve as preceptors and better support clinical training opportunities in shortage areas, ultimately contributing to a stronger, more resilient health care workforce across the State.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 595.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 598 - Physicians - Licensing - Internationally Trained Physicians  
Health Committee  
February 18, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports House Bill 598 - Physicians - Licensing - Internationally Trained Physicians**. This bill authorizes the State Board of Physicians to issue a medical practice license to internationally trained physicians starting October 1, 2028, under certain conditions. It also requires the Board to establish regulations that outline the minimum qualifications and application fees for licensure, as well as to create a pathway to full licensure.

Rural Marylanders are often in worse health than their urban and suburban counterparts and lack access to medical facilities and practitioners to improve their health. This is especially true in specialty areas such as mental health and dental care. Additionally, rural areas are made up of aging populations that require more medical attention but lack the healthcare workforce to do so. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) reports that more than 1.1 million Marylanders are in a primary care Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA). That's over 1.1 million Marylanders who lack access to the primary health care they need. In the U.S., rural or partially rural areas make up over 68% of the designated primary care HPSAs.

As of December 31, 2025, federal data from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) show that Maryland continues to face shortages in health care providers in federally designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). To eliminate primary care HPSA designations in the state, Maryland would need approximately 284 additional primary care practitioners. For mental health care HPSA designations, HRSA estimates the state would need about 81 additional mental health practitioners to remove all shortage designations. Internationally trained physicians could potentially help address these shortages by providing primary care and mental health services in designated HPSAs, particularly in rural areas of Maryland.

House Bill 598 will allow more high-level healthcare workers to practice in Maryland, where there are shortages or where physicians are needed. While certain areas of the State have been facing a shortage of healthcare workers, it was worsened by the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, members of the healthcare workforce are leaving at higher rates, mostly from the increased workload and amount of stress that they have been facing. As some healthcare workers quit, it creates more of a workload and stress for the remaining members, resulting in a cycle of burnout. This will allow workers to adequately perform their jobs and ensure that patients are getting the treatment that they need.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of House Bill 598.



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 609 - State Transfer Tax - Land Preservation Special Fund - Revenue Allocation  
Appropriations Committee  
March 3, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 609 - State Transfer Tax - Land Preservation Special Fund - Revenue Allocation**. This legislation repeals the requirement that \$25 million be transferred annually from the Land Preservation Special Fund to the State General Fund in fiscal years 2027, 2028, and 2029, ensuring that these dedicated revenues remain available for their intended purpose of protecting Maryland's farmland, forests, and open spaces.

The Land Preservation Special Fund is a critical financing mechanism for statewide and local land conservation programs, including Program Open Space, Rural Legacy, and agricultural land preservation initiatives. These programs play an essential role in sustaining Maryland's rural communities by preserving working landscapes, safeguarding natural resources, and supporting the agricultural economy. Diverting funds from the Special Fund weakens the long-term effectiveness and predictability of these programs and undermines the State's commitment to land preservation.

According to a recent study conducted by BEACON, the Business Economic and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University, with support from the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), resource-based industries represent a significant and crucial segment of Maryland's economy. The study found that agriculture and related support industries contribute more than \$25.7 billion in total economic output and support 91,349 jobs, accounting for the majority of the \$30.2 billion total economic impact and 108,461 jobs generated statewide by resource-based industries. These industries also generate more than \$1.1 billion in State and local tax revenues, with agriculture alone responsible for nearly \$950 million, underscoring the economic importance of preserving productive farmland and working rural landscapes.

Maryland's natural and rural landscapes also play a critical role in supporting the State's tourism economy. According to the Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland (2023) report, visitors spent \$20.5 billion statewide, generating a total economic impact of \$31.4 billion. Tourism activity supported 190,660 jobs, produced \$10.1 billion in labor income, and generated approximately \$2.4 billion in State and local tax revenues. These impacts highlight the strong connection between land preservation, environmental stewardship, and the continued vitality of Maryland's tourism and recreation-based economies.

Rural communities depend heavily on consistent and reliable conservation funding. Many rural jurisdictions face ongoing pressures from development, rising land values, and limited local fiscal capacity. When preservation funds are redirected to the General Fund, rural counties and land trusts experience delays, reduced project scopes, and missed opportunities to permanently protect valuable agricultural and natural lands. These impacts are especially significant in rural areas, where land preservation supports not only environmental outcomes but also local economies, heritage industries, and community character.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

House Bill 609 reinforces the principle that revenues dedicated to land preservation should be used as intended. By eliminating the mandated transfers, the bill helps stabilize funding for conservation programs, strengthens long-term planning efforts, and ensures that Maryland can continue to make strategic investments in land protection that benefit both current and future generations.

By preserving the integrity of the Land Preservation Special Fund, House Bill 609 will support rural resilience, environmental stewardship, and sustainable growth across Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of **House Bill 609**.



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

February 19, 2026

The Honorable Jheanelle Wilkins  
Ways and Means Committee  
130 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 676 - Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program - Establishment

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 676 - Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program - Establishment. This bill creates a pilot program to offer free, confidential, one-on-one financial counseling and education to low- and moderate-income Maryland residents. This pilot program seeks to empower individuals with the tools they need to manage their finances effectively, reduce debt, improve credit, and build a stronger financial foundation for the future.

By establishing a network of Financial Empowerment Centers (FECs) throughout the state, House Bill 676 ensures that communities, especially those in rural areas, have access to crucial financial services that are often difficult to obtain. For many Maryland residents, access to affordable financial counseling is limited, and this program aims to bridge that gap by providing essential services at no cost to those who need them most.

This program is not only beneficial for individual participants but also promotes economic stability and growth within local economies. As more individuals gain financial literacy and improve their financial well-being, they are better equipped to make sound financial decisions, manage debt, and increase savings. This, in turn, can stimulate local economies by increasing spending and demand for goods and services, benefiting small businesses and communities across the state.

Furthermore, the Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program will allow the state to evaluate the program's effectiveness and gather data to determine how financial counseling can contribute to long-term financial stability for participants. If successful, this pilot could serve as the foundation for expanding these services to a larger portion of the population, further promoting financial empowerment throughout Maryland.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 676.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 811 - Aging-in-Place Programs - Grants - Multigenerational Third Places (The Village  
Multigenerational Third Places Act)  
Health Committee  
February 26, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 811 - Aging-in-Place Programs - Grants - Multigenerational Third Places (The Village Multigenerational Third Places Act). House Bill 811 authorizes the Maryland Department of Aging to provide grants to nonprofit organizations and Area Agencies on Aging to strengthen aging-in-place programs and support social engagement through multigenerational third places. By expanding allowable uses of existing grant authority, the bill enables community-based organizations to create or enhance welcoming spaces where residents of all ages can gather, connect, and support one another. This legislation provides a thoughtful framework for strengthening community ties while helping older adults remain in their homes and neighborhoods.

Promoting aging in place requires more than housing and health support, it also requires meaningful social connection. Research consistently shows that prolonged isolation among older adults is associated with poorer physical health, increased rates of depression and anxiety, cognitive decline, and higher health care costs. By supporting opportunities for intergenerational interaction and community participation, HB 811 addresses these challenges proactively. Investing in social infrastructure today can reduce more intensive and costly interventions in the future.

This proposal is particularly meaningful for rural communities across Maryland. Geographic distance, limited transportation options, and fewer centralized gathering spaces can intensify isolation for older residents. Rural communities often rely on trusted local institutions, such as senior centers, libraries, faith-based organizations, and small nonprofits, to serve as hubs of connection. However, these organizations frequently operate with constrained budgets and limited staff capacity. Grant support through the Maryland General Assembly's authorization would help sustain and expand the kinds of multigenerational gathering spaces that are essential in rural areas.

House Bill 811 takes a practical and community-driven approach. By encouraging collaboration across generations and strengthening neighborhood-based support, the bill reinforces Maryland's commitment to helping residents age with dignity, independence, and connection.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of House Bill 811.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 909 - Sales and Use Tax - Cut Flowers – Exemption  
Ways and Means Committee  
February 19, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 909 - Sales and Use Tax - Cut Flowers – Exemption**. House Bill 909 provides meaningful financial support to Maryland farmers by exempting sales and use tax on cut flowers sold directly by the growers who produce them. This targeted tax relief recognizes the unique cost structure faced by small and medium-sized agricultural operations and helps strengthen the economic sustainability of local farms.

For many farmers, the costs of production extend far beyond land and equipment. Labor, inputs, transportation, and market access represent significant ongoing expenses. Flower farmers, in particular, face high upfront costs for seeds, soil amendments, climate control, harvesting, and post-harvest handling, while often operating on thin margins. Removing the sales tax on direct flower sales allows farmers to retain a greater share of their revenue and reinvest it into their operations.

Maryland already exempts certain agricultural purchases from sales and use tax in recognition of the essential role farming plays in the state's economy and food system. Extending similar consideration to cut flowers sold by farmers is consistent with this approach and supports diversification within agriculture. Encouraging locally grown floral products also benefits rural economies and promotes direct-to-consumer sales channels such as farm stands and farmers' markets.

When farm operating costs rise, those increases are frequently passed on to consumers. By easing the tax burden on flower farmers, this bill helps stabilize prices while keeping local farms competitive with large, out-of-state producers. Supporting the financial viability of farmers today is critical to ensuring that agriculture remains a viable livelihood for future generations.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of **House Bill 909**.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Maryland  
Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Act)  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 25, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Act). This proposed legislation seeks to establish the Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund, a dedicated, ongoing fund aimed at promoting agricultural education and fairs across the state. The fund will be self-sustaining, with any interest earned being reinvested back into it. Additionally, the bill allocates \$1,450,000 annually from the state's lottery revenues, before any other funds are directed to the General Fund, to support this initiative.

In addition, the bill eliminates the previous requirement for using specific funds from the state horse racing special fund to support agricultural fairs and education, consolidating funding sources under the new promise fund.

Agricultural education plays a critical role in Maryland's future, helping equip the next generation with essential skills in agriculture, environmental sciences, and agribusiness. These programs are vital for both sustaining the state's agricultural heritage and ensuring its future economic and environmental health. By preparing students and young professionals with the tools to succeed, the state is fostering long-term growth in a key sector.

Agricultural fairs, too, are central to Maryland's agricultural legacy. These events offer farmers an opportunity to showcase locally grown produce, livestock, and crafts, building stronger connections between producers and consumers. They provide valuable economic stimulus for local communities and serve as a platform for celebrating Maryland's agricultural products.

Beyond their economic impact, agricultural fairs also serve as important educational hubs, offering workshops, demonstrations, and competitions that promote awareness of sustainable farming practices and the challenges faced by farmers. These events help bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, increasing public appreciation for the vital role agriculture plays in the state's culture and economy.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 972.



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 31, 2026

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Charles J. Otto Agricultural Education Promise Act)

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Charles J. Otto Agricultural Education Promise Act), as amended. This proposed legislation establishes the Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund, a dedicated, nonlapsing fund aimed at promoting agricultural education and fairs across the state. The fund will be administered by the Comptroller and will remain self-sustaining, with any interest earnings retained within the fund.

As amended, the bill provides a stable and predictable funding source by requiring an annual distribution of \$1,450,000 to the Promise Fund. In addition, the legislation requires the Governor to include at least \$200,000 annually in the State budget for the fund, further strengthening its long-term reliability. The amended bill also eliminates the previous requirement that agricultural fair and education funding be supported through the State Horse Racing Special Fund, replacing it with this more dependable funding structure under the new Promise Fund.

Importantly, the bill strengthens support for agricultural education programs by increasing funding allocations, including enhanced support for organizations such as the Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation and the Maryland FFA Association. These investments will expand opportunities for students and educators engaged in agricultural learning and leadership development.

Agricultural education plays a critical role in Maryland's future, helping equip the next generation with essential skills in agriculture, environmental sciences, and agribusiness. These programs are vital for sustaining the state's agricultural heritage and ensuring its long-term economic and environmental health. By preparing students and young professionals with the tools to succeed, the state is fostering growth in a key sector.

Agricultural fairs are equally central to Maryland's agricultural legacy. These events provide farmers with opportunities to showcase locally grown produce, livestock, and crafts, strengthening connections between producers and consumers. They generate important economic activity for local communities while celebrating Maryland's agricultural achievements.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Beyond their economic impact, agricultural fairs also serve as educational hubs, offering workshops, demonstrations, and competitions that promote awareness of sustainable farming practices and the challenges faced by farmers. These events help bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, increasing public appreciation for agriculture's vital role in the state's culture and economy.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 972 as amended.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "CD", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 31, 2026

The Honorable Guy Guzzone  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
3 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Charles J. Otto Agricultural Education Promise Act)

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 972 - Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund - Establishment (Charles J. Otto Agricultural Education Promise Act), as amended. This proposed legislation establishes the Maryland Fair and Agricultural Education Promise Fund, a dedicated, nonlapsing fund aimed at promoting agricultural education and fairs across the state. The fund will be administered by the Comptroller and will remain self-sustaining, with any interest earnings retained within the fund.

As amended, the bill provides a stable and predictable funding source by requiring an annual distribution of \$1,450,000 to the Promise Fund. In addition, the legislation requires the Governor to include at least \$200,000 annually in the State budget for the fund, further strengthening its long-term reliability. The amended bill also eliminates the previous requirement that agricultural fair and education funding be supported through the State Horse Racing Special Fund, replacing it with this more dependable funding structure under the new Promise Fund.

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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

challenges faced by farmers. These events help bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, increasing public appreciation for agriculture's vital role in the state's culture and economy.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 972 as amended.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "CD", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 1128 - Income Tax - Angel Investor Tax Credit for Investments in Emergent Technology  
Ways and Means Committee  
March 5, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 1128 - Income Tax - Angel Investor Tax Credit for Investments in Emergent Technology**. House Bill 1128 creates a meaningful opportunity to strengthen Maryland's innovation economy by encouraging private investment in emerging, high-impact industries. By establishing an Angel Investor Tax Credit for investments in emergent technology companies, the bill helps reduce early-stage risk and makes it more attractive for Maryland investors to support Maryland entrepreneurs.

Many of the industries shaping Maryland's future are deeply interconnected. Indoor agriculture, for example, is not simply about growing food indoors, it brings together environmental science, energy efficiency, data systems, and advanced facility design. These operations often serve as platforms for research, workforce development, and supply chain innovation.

Biotechnology is another area where Maryland has long demonstrated leadership. From laboratory research to bio-manufacturing and applied plant science, biotech enterprises require significant upfront capital before products reach market. Early-stage investors are often the difference between promising research remaining in a lab and becoming a scalable enterprise that creates jobs and attracts follow-on investment. House Bill 1128 helps close that gap by incentivizing those first critical dollars.

Advanced automation and robotics also play a supporting role in many of these sectors, improving efficiency, precision, and safety in production and distribution environments. Likewise, transportation and logistics technologies help ensure that products developed or grown in Maryland move efficiently through regional and national markets. Together, these industries reinforce one another and contribute to a broader ecosystem of innovation.

For communities across the State, including rural areas and emerging innovation corridors, access to early-stage capital can determine whether transformative projects take root locally or move elsewhere. Facilities tied to indoor agriculture, biotechnology, and related technologies require substantial investment in infrastructure, workforce training, and research capacity. Encouraging angel investment helps anchor these projects in Maryland and strengthens long-term economic stability.

By lowering barriers to early-stage investment and supporting growth in sectors such as biotechnology, indoor agriculture, and advanced technology systems, this bill enhances Maryland's competitiveness and resilience.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 1128.



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 20, 2026

The Honorable Marc Korman  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
250 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 1388 - Oysters - Rotational Harvest - Pilot Program

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 1388 - Oysters - Rotational Harvest - Pilot Program.** HB 1388 establishes a rotational oyster harvest pilot program to be administered by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources in designated areas of the Chesapeake Bay. The program would allow the Department to open and close oyster bars on a rotating basis while implementing science-based monitoring and requiring shell replacement proportional to harvested bushels.

The pilot would operate from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2032, in four regions: the Lower Choptank River, Lower Main Stem Chesapeake Bay, Herring Bay, and Lower Chester River. Prior to opening an area for harvest, the Department must conduct baseline environmental and biological surveys assessing oyster density, disease prevalence, habitat conditions, and water quality. Monitoring would continue after harvest closures to evaluate ecological outcomes and guide future management decisions.

Participation would be limited to individuals holding valid Tidal Fisheries Licenses with oyster authorizations, while the Department retains authority to establish catch limits, gear restrictions, season dates, and other harvest parameters to ensure conservation objectives are met. Harvesters participating in the program must also return an equivalent volume of oyster shell to the bar from which oysters were taken, helping maintain reef substrate and support future spat settlement.

By December 1, 2031, the Department must submit a report to the Governor and the General Assembly summarizing findings and providing recommendations regarding continuation, modification, or termination of the rotational harvest model.

HB 1388 represents a balanced, science-driven approach that supports both ecological restoration and Maryland's working waterfront communities. Historically, the Chesapeake Bay oyster fishery was one of the most productive in the world, but the industry has experienced significant decline due to overharvesting, habitat loss, and disease, resulting in a substantial reduction in both oyster populations and the economic activity associated with the fishery.

Recent events have further strained the industry. In February 2026, Maryland officials requested a federal fishery disaster declaration for the Chesapeake Bay oyster industry following a combination of extreme winter weather, environmental disruptions, and declining market demand that significantly reduced harvest opportunities and depressed oyster prices (Maryland Matters, Feb. 27, 2026).



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Despite these challenges, the seafood industry remains an important component of Maryland's resource-based economy. According to the 2025 Report on the Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy, prepared by the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) and the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) at Salisbury University, Maryland's seafood industry contributed approximately \$317.4 million to the state's economy, representing 1.1% of the total impact from resource-based industries. The sector supported 3,014 jobs (or 2.8% of total RBI employment) and generated over \$11.9 million in state and local tax revenue (accounting for 1.1% of the total RBI tax contribution). It's important to note that the aquaculture sector, which has seen significant growth in recent years, is not fully included in these impact estimates for the seafood industry.

By testing rotational harvest strategies under controlled conditions, the State can gather meaningful data to inform future oyster management policy while sustaining economic activity tied to the Chesapeake Bay and supporting the livelihoods of Maryland's watermen and coastal communities.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 1388.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 1473 - Economic Development - Maryland's Future Board - Establishment  
Economic Matters Committee  
March 3, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **House Bill 1473 - Economic Development - Maryland's Future Board - Establishment**. House Bill 1473 establishes Maryland's Future Board within the Maryland Department of Commerce to develop and maintain a long-term, forward-looking economic development strategy for our State. It also creates Maryland's Future Fund as a non-lapsing fund to support that work. Importantly, the bill does not shift decision-making authority away from the Governor or the Maryland General Assembly; instead, it strengthens their ability to act strategically by providing thoughtful analysis, coordination, and clear recommendations for high-impact investments.

Maryland's economy is diverse and interconnected. Growth in one region often supports opportunity in another. House Bill 1473 encourages a more deliberate and coordinated approach to economic development. By establishing a board specifically tasked with identifying long-range priorities, the legislation promotes smarter planning around infrastructure, workforce development, industry recruitment, and innovation.

As Maryland plans for long-term economic growth, inclusion of agricultural representation on the Board would further strengthen this effort by ensuring that one of the State's foundational industries is fully integrated into its forward-looking strategy. Agriculture today extends well beyond traditional production and increasingly intersects with biotechnology, indoor and controlled-environment agriculture, precision technologies, and unmanned systems. These sectors are fundamental components of Maryland's innovation economy and are especially vital to rural prosperity. Recognizing agriculture's evolving role within the State's broader economic landscape would enhance the Board's ability to develop a comprehensive, future-oriented strategy.

For communities across the State, including rural areas, this kind of structure provides clarity and stability. Strategic investments in broadband, transportation, site development, and workforce partnerships require sustained attention and coordination. A dedicated board can help ensure those efforts are aligned, data-driven, and responsive to regional needs, rather than fragmented or reactive.

The creation of a non-lapsing fund is also an important feature of the bill. Meaningful economic development projects often take multiple years to plan and implement. A funding structure that carries forward from year to year allows Maryland to pursue transformative initiatives without being constrained by short-term fiscal cycles. That stability increases confidence for businesses, local governments, and private partners considering long-term investments in the State.

Ultimately, House Bill 1473 is about strengthening Maryland's capacity to compete and grow responsibly. It provides a framework for collaboration, accountability, and sustained planning while preserving legislative oversight. By taking a proactive and coordinated approach to economic development, this bill helps position Maryland for long-term prosperity and resilience.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 1473.



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 20, 2026

The Honorable Jheanelle Wilkins  
Ways and Means Committee  
130 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 1554 - Sales and Use Tax - Electricity for Agriculture Purposes  
- Study and Report

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 1554 - Sales and Use Tax - Electricity for Agriculture Purposes - Study and Report.** This bill requires a study examining the potential impact of exempting electricity used for agricultural purposes from Maryland's sales and use tax. The goal of this effort is to better understand how energy costs affect farmers and whether a targeted exemption could help reduce operational expenses for agricultural producers across the state.

By directing the Maryland Comptroller's Office to conduct this analysis in coordination with the Maryland Public Service Commission and PJM Interconnection, House Bill 1554 ensures that policymakers receive reliable data about electricity usage in agricultural operations. Activities such as irrigation, livestock and poultry care, crop production, and food storage rely heavily on electricity, making energy costs an important factor in farm operations.

This study will help the state evaluate whether an exemption could support Maryland's agricultural sector while maintaining fiscal responsibility. Agriculture plays a vital role in supporting rural communities and local economies and understanding how energy policy impacts the industry is an important step toward strengthening its long-term sustainability.

Finally, the report produced under House Bill 1554 will provide lawmakers with the information needed to evaluate potential policy changes in the future. If the findings show meaningful benefits, this study could serve as the foundation for future efforts to support Maryland farmers and the state's agricultural economy.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of HB 1554.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 30, 2026

The Honorable Marc Korman  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
250 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support with Amendments of House Bill 1599 - Chesapeake Bay Enhancement Program - Established

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 1599 - Chesapeake Bay Enhancement Program - Established and asks that HB 1599 be amended to mirror amendments approved to its Senate companion, SB 558, which authorizes the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) to issue emergency loans to watermen.** HB 1599 creates a new statewide initiative within the Maryland Department of Natural Resources focused on rebuilding oyster populations and addressing environmental impacts linked to major development activities. The program is intended to direct resources toward areas of the Chesapeake Bay where oyster habitat has been disrupted, using restoration strategies such as reef rebuilding and the placement of young oysters to strengthen long-term population health.

Under this approach, restoration efforts would be guided by scientific data and coordinated planning, with funding dedicated to improving habitat conditions and supporting oyster survival. By establishing a formal structure in law, the State can ensure these efforts continue consistently over time rather than relying on temporary or informal arrangements. This creates a clearer connection between environmental impacts and the investments needed to address them.

Maryland's oyster industry has faced increasing pressure in recent years due to environmental variability, market shifts, and extreme weather, all of which have reduced harvest opportunities and created uncertainty for watermen. These conditions underscore the need for proactive measures to strengthen resilience and promote stability within the industry.

Despite these challenges, the seafood sector remains a significant contributor to Maryland's economy. According to the 2025 Report on the Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy, prepared by the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation and the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University, the industry generates approximately \$317.4 million in economic activity, representing 1.1% of total resource-based industry output. It supports 3,014 jobs (2.8% of employment in these sectors) and produces over \$11.9 million in state and local tax revenue. These figures do not fully reflect the continued growth of aquaculture. The industry also remains central to many coastal communities, with oysters playing a critical role in both ecosystem function and the viability of working waterfronts.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

By investing in oyster restoration tied to environmental impacts, HB 1599 advances a practical approach that supports both ecological health and economic sustainability. Strengthening oyster populations improves water quality, enhances habitat, and helps maintain a stable foundation for Maryland's seafood industry.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support with amendments of HB 1599.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "CD", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

January 30, 2026

The Honorable Guy Guzzone  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
3 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support: Senate Bill 58 - Property Tax Credit - Retail Service Station Conversions

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 58 - Property Tax Credit – Retail Service Station Conversions.** This bill encourages the repurposing of underutilized properties, potentially leading to revitalized communities and more efficient land use. It allows local governments, including Baltimore City and counties, to grant property tax credits on real properties converted from retail service stations to other uses. Additionally, the bill authorizes the state to reimburse participating local jurisdictions for 50% of the forgone property tax revenue resulting from these credits, as specified in the state budget. This incentivizes the conversion of vacant properties and promotes community development.

Senate Bill 58 benefits rural areas by providing property tax credits for converting underutilized retail service stations into alternative uses, thereby driving revitalization in these communities. Many rural areas have abandoned or underdeveloped properties, and this bill encourages redevelopment that can attract new businesses or services to those locations. It incentivizes property revitalization by encouraging the transformation of unused or abandoned retail service stations into productive uses, which can help revitalize rural areas and make better use of existing properties. The bill supports local economic growth by creating opportunities for new businesses and job creation, which is particularly beneficial in rural communities that may struggle with economic activity and development. Additionally, repurposing retail service stations can lead to improvements in local infrastructure and services, such as new retail establishments, community centers, or essential services.

By promoting these conversions in rural areas, the bill helps ensure more efficient use of land, encourages community development, and can stimulate local economies. **The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 58.**

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 257 - Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund - Reporting  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
February 10, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports SB 257 - Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund - Reporting**. This bill strengthens legislative oversight and transparency by requiring the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide detailed annual reporting on the use of funds credited to the Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund. Specifically, SB 257 requires DNR to report on how fund revenues are used, the amount of agricultural land transfer tax proceeds distributed to the fund from woodland-only property transfers, and any uncertainties regarding those distributions.

The Mel Noland Woodland Incentives and Fellowship Fund plays an important role in supporting Maryland's forestry workforce and woodland stewardship efforts. Clear and consistent reporting ensures that funds intended to support forestry incentives and professional development programs are properly tracked, fully allocated, and used as intended. Increased transparency also helps policymakers identify funding gaps, resolve uncertainties, and make informed decisions that support long-term workforce and conservation goals.

Maryland's forestry industry is a vital component of the State's rural economy. A recent economic impact study by BEACON at Salisbury University, conducted with support from the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), found that forestry contributes more than \$4.1 billion to Maryland's economy, represents nearly 14% of resource-based industry activity, supports over 14,000 jobs statewide, and generates more than \$139 million in State and local tax revenue. Ensuring accountability in programs that support this industry is critical to maintaining its economic strength and sustainability.

As demand for forestry education, workforce development, and woodland incentive programs continues to grow, accurate reporting is essential to ensure that available resources are maximized and directed where they are most needed. SB 257 provides the General Assembly with the information necessary to evaluate program effectiveness and ensure that revenues dedicated to forestry initiatives are fully and appropriately utilized.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 257.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 282/House Bill 390 – Budget Bill (Fiscal Year 2027)  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
Public Safety, Transportation and Environment Subcommittee  
Thursday, February 19, 2026

**The Rural Maryland Council respectfully supports the Governor’s appropriation for the Rural Maryland Council and the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund contained in Senate Bill 282 / House Bill 390 Budget Bill (Fiscal Year 2027).** To meet statewide demand and generate meaningful impact across rural Maryland, the Council believes \$9 million represents the appropriate funding level. However, we recognize and appreciate the fiscal realities facing the State and accept the proposed \$6 million appropriation in FY2027 as level funding under current budget conditions.

The funds allocated in the FY2027 budget will support the Rural Maryland Council’s operations and activities; the Council’s two grant programs - the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF) and the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF); and provides vital capacity and programming to the State’s five Rural Regional Councils.

These funds are essential to helping rural communities recover and grow at a pace comparable to the rest of Maryland. The programs support economic development, health care access, workforce training, food security, broadband expansion, and critical community infrastructure across rural regions of the State.

Demand for these programs continues to far exceed available resources.

In FY2026, the Council received 170 applications requesting more than \$14 million in funding. Due to limited resources, the Council was only able to fund 62 projects totaling \$5,468,485.

In FY2025, the Council received 204 applications totaling \$19,834,402. The Council awarded 65 grants totaling \$6,129,837. Although the Council was appropriated \$9 million in FY2025, a \$2.25 million reduction was made by the Board of Public Works in July 2024.

Despite funding constraints, the outcomes of these investments are significant. Grant recipients have:

- Improved educational outcomes for at-risk and minority youth through summer enrichment programming
- Addressed food insecurity by supporting infrastructure to establish local grocery access
- Expanded broadband connections to new homes
- Provided medical transportation, personnel, and essential health services

From 2018 to 2024, the Rural Maryland Council's grant programs generated:

- \$301.2 million in economic output
- 2,152 jobs supported
- More than \$102 million in wages paid

This is more than data - it represents real growth, real jobs, and measurable return on investment for the State of Maryland.

The Council is grateful for the proposed \$6 million appropriation in the FY2027 budget and appreciates the Administration's continued investment in rural Maryland during a challenging fiscal environment.

In addition, the Council is a designated subrecipient to advance a 'Food as Health' initiative through the Maryland Department of Health's Rural Health Transformation Program. This initiative will focus on increasing access to healthy, locally sourced food by supporting regional aggregation and developing a coordinated purchasing strategy to strengthen local supply chains. To implement this initiative effectively, the Council will request a supplemental budget adjustment once the total award amount is finalized.

The strength of the Council's impact is directly tied to the resources provided through the State's operating budget. Council members and rural nonprofit partners leverage these State funds with local and federal investments to expand opportunity and improve the lives of rural Marylanders.

The Rural Maryland Council thanks Governor Moore for his continued support and respectfully requests your favorable support of the Governor's appropriation included in Senate Bill 282.

*The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county, and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county, and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.*

**"A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland"**



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 288 - Transportation - Highway User Revenues Capital Grants - Calculation  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
February 3, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **Senate Bill 288 – Transportation – Highway User Revenue – Capital Grants**. This bill alters the amount of certain capital grants calculated based on highway user revenues that are required to be appropriated to Baltimore City, counties, and municipalities by increasing the share allocated to counties while maintaining existing distributions for Baltimore City and municipalities. Beginning in fiscal year 2027, the bill raises the counties' share of capital grants from the Gasoline and Motor Vehicle Revenue Account to 15.2%, while Baltimore City continues to receive 12.2% and municipalities continue to receive 3.0%. The Rural Maryland Council supports efforts to strengthen Highway User Revenue funding to ensure adequate transportation infrastructure throughout the State.

Highway User Revenues are derived from gas taxes, vehicle registration fees, and other motor vehicle-related revenues and are dedicated to supporting local roadways and bridges in Maryland. Historically, these revenues played a critical role in helping local governments maintain transportation infrastructure. However, significant reductions have continued to affect the ability of counties and municipalities, particularly in rural areas, to adequately fund road repair, maintenance, and transportation services. While funding levels have gradually increased, they remain below historical levels and continue to strain local budgets.

For more than 40 years, Maryland operated under a 70/30 Highway User Revenue split, with 70% dedicated to state roads and 30% shared with local governments. That longstanding formula was drastically reduced during the Great Recession and has never been fully restored. Despite temporary funding increases, the local share remains well below historic levels, recently hovering around 20% and projected to fall to approximately 15.6% due to an impending funding cliff. According to previous committee testimony on Highway User Revenue, local governments maintain more than 80% of Maryland's roadways but receive less than one-fifth of transportation revenues, contributing to a cumulative shortfall of over \$4.5 billion to counties since FY 2007.

Drivers generate revenue for local road projects through gas taxes and vehicle-related fees, and SB 288 helps ensure that a greater portion of these funds is directed back to local governments to address infrastructure needs in their communities. By increasing the share allocated to counties, this legislation provides additional resources to support safer, more reliable transportation networks across Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 288.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 300 - Economic Development - Rural Readiness Program and  
Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund – Establishment  
Finance Committee  
February 5, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports Senate Bill 300 – Economic Development – Rural Readiness Program and Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund.** This legislation establishes the Rural Readiness Program within the Rural Maryland Council to assist small towns and small nonprofit organizations that lack the capacity to compete for funding and implement community and economic development projects. The bill also creates a dedicated capacity-building fund to support early planning and predevelopment activities and authorizes the Council to certify program participants and provide priority consideration in Rural Maryland Council grant funding decisions.

Rural communities face unique structural challenges that limit their ability to successfully pursue funding opportunities and carry out development initiatives. These challenges include smaller tax bases; limited access to critical infrastructure such as broadband and transportation; difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled staff to manage projects; fewer social and professional networks to support collaboration; and aging populations coupled with the outmigration of younger residents. Without targeted capacity-building support, these barriers contribute to persistent disparities in healthcare access, educational opportunity, infrastructure investment, and economic growth across rural Maryland.

The Rural Readiness Program is designed to address these challenges by providing early-stage planning support that helps communities become better positioned to compete for state, federal, and philanthropic funding. The program would operate as a pilot reimbursement grant program administered by the Rural Maryland Council, offering grants of up to \$50,000 per community. Through direct Council staff assistance, community assessments, and flexible planning funds, participating communities would be able to develop strategic plans, feasibility studies, market analyses, and other foundational work necessary to advance high-quality projects.

Eligible applicants under SB 300 include tax-exempt organizations, local units of government, state-recognized Tribes, institutions of higher education, and regional planning, economic, or workforce development organizations. State agencies and for-profit entities seeking operational staffing support or proposing non-rural projects are not eligible. By focusing resources on rural communities with demonstrated need, the program ensures that limited funds are directed where they can have the greatest impact.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

By strengthening local capacity and prioritizing readiness, Senate Bill 300 will improve the quality, competitiveness, and long-term success of rural development projects. This investment will help rural communities plan more effectively, leverage additional funding, and implement initiatives that support economic growth, job creation, and improved quality of life across rural Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 300.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

February 10, 2026

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 371 - Water Pollution Control - Discharge Permits - Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 371 - Water Pollution Control - Discharge Permits - Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. This bill clarifies Maryland law regarding discharge permits for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) by removing the requirement that a general discharge permit be obtained prior to the commencement of construction. Senate Bill 371 maintains all existing water pollution control standards while ensuring that agricultural producers are not subject to duplicative or premature permitting requirements before a facility is operational.

By aligning the timing of permitting with actual discharge risk, Senate Bill 371 supports Maryland's agricultural community, particularly in rural regions where livestock and poultry operations are central to the local economy. For many farm families, especially on the Eastern Shore and in other rural counties, upfront permitting requirements can delay projects, increase costs, and create uncertainty for lenders and contractors. This legislation helps streamline the process while preserving the State's authority to regulate discharges once an operation begins and is subject to environmental oversight.

This approach is not only beneficial for individual producers but also strengthens rural economies more broadly. Agriculture supports thousands of jobs in processing, transportation, equipment sales, construction, and feed supply. When farmers can modernize or expand their operations efficiently, it stimulates economic activity throughout surrounding communities. Reducing unnecessary regulatory barriers can help ensure that Maryland farms remain competitive with operations in neighboring states, preventing the loss of agricultural investment and jobs across state lines.

Furthermore, Senate Bill 371 reinforces a balanced regulatory framework by maintaining environmental protections under Maryland's Water Pollution Control laws while improving clarity and predictability in the permitting process. By preserving water quality standards and enforcement authority, the bill allows the State to continue protecting local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay, while also recognizing the operational realities faced by farmers. This measured adjustment promotes both environmental stewardship and agricultural viability, ensuring that rural Maryland can remain economically strong and environmentally responsible for the long term.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 371.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

February 4, 2026

The Honorable Guy Guzzone  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
3 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support: Senate Bill 377 - Earned Income Tax Credit - Individuals Without Qualifying Children - Eligibility

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 377 - Earned Income Tax Credit - Individuals Without Qualifying Children – Eligibility.** This bill expands eligibility for the Maryland Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for individuals without qualifying children. This legislation adjusts the income thresholds at which the state EITC phases out for individuals without qualifying children and ensures that, beginning after the 2025 tax year, these income thresholds and phase-out amounts are adjusted annually for inflation. The changes proposed in this bill will apply to all taxable years beginning after December 31, 2025, with an effective date of July 1, 2026.

By expanding eligibility for the EITC, Senate Bill 377 offers critical financial relief to hardworking Marylanders who are employed yet still struggling to make ends meet. Extending eligibility to include individuals without qualifying children recognizes the valuable contributions of all workers, regardless of family status, and encourages workforce participation by allowing more individuals to receive meaningful tax relief.

Expanding eligibility also has positive impacts beyond individual households by supporting local economies. When individuals receive greater financial resources through tax credits, they are more likely to spend that money in their communities, increasing demand for goods and services and stimulating economic activity. This effect is particularly important for small and rural businesses throughout Maryland.

Crucially, this bill also promotes fairness in the tax system. Under current federal and state EITC rules, workers without children have a significantly lower income threshold and smaller credit amounts compared to taxpayers with children. By raising the eligibility thresholds and indexing them for inflation over time, Senate Bill 377 moves Maryland toward a more equitable tax structure that supports a broader range of working individuals.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 377.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 380 - Physicians - Licensing - Internationally Trained Physicians  
Finance Committee  
February 10, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports Senate Bill 380 - Physicians - Licensing - Internationally Trained Physicians**. This bill authorizes the State Board of Physicians to issue a medical practice license to internationally trained physicians starting October 1, 2028, under certain conditions. It also requires the Board to establish regulations that outline the minimum qualifications and application fees for licensure, as well as to create a pathway to full licensure.

Rural Marylanders are often in worse health than their urban and suburban counterparts and lack access to medical facilities and practitioners to improve their health. This is especially true in specialty areas such as mental health and dental care. Additionally, rural areas are made up of aging populations that require more medical attention but lack the healthcare workforce to do so. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) reports that more than 1.1 million Marylanders are in a primary care Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA). That's over 1.1 million Marylanders who lack access to the primary health care they need. In the U.S., rural or partially rural areas make up over 68% of the designated primary care HPSAs.

As of December 31, 2025, federal data from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) show that Maryland continues to face shortages in health care providers in federally designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). To eliminate primary care HPSA designations in the state, Maryland would need approximately 284 additional primary care practitioners. For mental health care HPSA designations, HRSA estimates the state would need about 81 additional mental health practitioners to remove all shortage designations. Internationally trained physicians could potentially help address these shortages by providing primary care and mental health services in designated HPSAs, particularly in rural areas of Maryland.

Senate Bill 380 will allow more high-level healthcare workers to practice in Maryland, where there are shortages or where physicians are needed. While certain areas of the State have been facing a shortage of healthcare workers, it was worsened by the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, members of the healthcare workforce are leaving at higher rates, mostly from the increased workload and amount of stress that they have been facing. As some healthcare workers quit, it creates more of a workload and stress for the remaining members, resulting in a cycle of burnout. This will allow workers to adequately perform their jobs and ensure that patients are getting the treatment that they need.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 380.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 424 - State Transfer Tax - Land Preservation Special Fund - Revenue Allocation  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
February 18, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **Senate Bill 424 - State Transfer Tax - Land Preservation Special Fund - Revenue Allocation**. This legislation repeals the requirement that \$25 million be transferred annually from the Land Preservation Special Fund to the State General Fund in fiscal years 2027, 2028, and 2029, ensuring that these dedicated revenues remain available for their intended purpose of protecting Maryland's farmland, forests, and open spaces.

The Land Preservation Special Fund is a critical financing mechanism for statewide and local land conservation programs, including Program Open Space, Rural Legacy, and agricultural land preservation initiatives. These programs play an essential role in sustaining Maryland's rural communities by preserving working landscapes, safeguarding natural resources, and supporting the agricultural economy. Diverting funds from the Special Fund weakens the long-term effectiveness and predictability of these programs and undermines the State's commitment to land preservation.

According to a recent study conducted by BEACON, the Business Economic and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University, with support from the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), resource-based industries represent a significant and crucial segment of Maryland's economy. The study found that agriculture and related support industries contribute more than \$25.7 billion in total economic output and support 91,349 jobs, accounting for the majority of the \$30.2 billion total economic impact and 108,461 jobs generated statewide by resource-based industries. These industries also generate more than \$1.1 billion in State and local tax revenues, with agriculture alone responsible for nearly \$950 million, underscoring the economic importance of preserving productive farmland and working rural landscapes.

Maryland's natural and rural landscapes also play a critical role in supporting the State's tourism economy. According to the Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland (2023) report, visitors spent \$20.5 billion statewide, generating a total economic impact of \$31.4 billion. Tourism activity supported 190,660 jobs, produced \$10.1 billion in labor income, and generated approximately \$2.4 billion in State and local tax revenues. These impacts highlight the strong connection between land preservation, environmental stewardship, and the continued vitality of Maryland's tourism and recreation-based economies.

Rural communities depend heavily on consistent and reliable conservation funding. Many rural jurisdictions face ongoing pressures from development, rising land values, and limited local fiscal capacity. When preservation funds are redirected to the General Fund, rural counties and land trusts experience delays, reduced project scopes, and missed opportunities to permanently protect valuable agricultural and natural lands. These impacts are especially significant in rural areas, where land preservation supports not only environmental outcomes but also local economies, heritage industries, and community character.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Senate Bill 424 reinforces the principle that revenues dedicated to land preservation should be used as intended. By eliminating the mandated transfers, the bill helps stabilize funding for conservation programs, strengthens long-term planning efforts, and ensures that Maryland can continue to make strategic investments in land protection that benefit both current and future generations.

By preserving the integrity of the Land Preservation Special Fund, Senate Bill 424 will support rural resilience, environmental stewardship, and sustainable growth across Maryland.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of **Senate Bill 424**.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 431- Fish and Wildlife - Endangered and Threatened Species and Migratory Birds -  
Regulations, Lists, Petitions, Essential Habitats, and Takings  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
February 17, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports Senate Bill 431 - Fish and Wildlife - Endangered and Threatened Species and Migratory Birds - Regulations, Lists, Petitions, Essential Habitats, and Takings**. Senate Bill 431 updates Maryland's endangered and threatened species law by establishing a clear, science-based framework for reviewing species listings, regulations, and essential habitat designations. The bill authorizes the Department of Natural Resources to periodically evaluate existing regulations, consider updated scientific data, and ensure that protections remain appropriate, effective, and transparent.

Maryland's current statute provides important protection for endangered and threatened species, but many of its regulatory components have not been systematically reviewed in decades. SB 431 creates a predictable process for reassessing those protections, including the criteria used for listing and delisting species and the information required when petitions are submitted. This approach strengthens conservation by ensuring decisions are based on the best available science and current conditions on the ground.

The bill also benefits landowners, businesses, and local governments by improving clarity and consistency. When regulations are clearly defined and regularly reviewed, regulated communities are better able to plan projects, manage land responsibly, and comply with the law. SB 431 helps avoid outdated or duplicative requirements that may no longer serve conservation goals, while preserving strong safeguards for species that truly need them.

Land use decisions and wildlife conservation are closely linked in Maryland. Forests, farms, and working lands provide critical habitat for many species, but they also support thousands of jobs and contribute billions of dollars to the state's economy. By encouraging cooperation between the Department of Natural Resources and stakeholders, SB 431 promotes conservation strategies that protect wildlife while recognizing the practical realities of land management.

Healthy ecosystems depend not only on protection, but on active, informed management. Regulations that reflect current science and local conditions are more likely to result in meaningful conservation outcomes. SB 431 advances this goal by modernizing Maryland's endangered species framework and ensuring it remains effective, credible, and balanced.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 431.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 466 – Income Tax – Credit for Physician Preceptors in Areas With Health Care Workforce  
Shortages  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
February 18, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **Senate Bill 466 – Income Tax – Credit for Physician Preceptors in Areas With Health Care Workforce Shortages**. SB 466 would expand and improve the existing Preceptor Tax Credit Program by altering eligibility for a State income tax credit for physician preceptors in designated health care workforce shortage areas. The bill removes the requirement that students in a physician preceptorship must be enrolled in a Maryland medical school or training program and reduces the number of required hours for a preceptor rotation in community-based clinical training, making the credit more accessible and responsive to current workforce needs. The bill applies to taxable years beginning after December 31, 2025.

The Preceptor Tax Credit Program was created to strengthen Maryland's health care workforce by encouraging licensed professionals to serve as preceptors, providing critical, hands-on clinical learning experiences in underserved areas. Currently, the program authorizes a tax credit against State income tax for individuals, including physicians, who serve without compensation as preceptors in defined preceptorship programs and work in areas with health care workforce shortages. A qualifying preceptorship pairs a medical student or nurse practitioner student with a licensed physician or nurse practitioner for structured clinical training.

Maryland continues to face health care workforce shortages, especially in rural and medically underserved areas. Encouraging preceptorships through tax incentives increases the number of trained clinicians and supports retention of providers who understand and serve community needs. By broadening eligibility and reducing barriers to participation, SB 466 will help more physicians serve as preceptors and better support clinical training opportunities in shortage areas, ultimately contributing to a stronger, more resilient health care workforce across the State.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 466.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 489 - Health Occupations - Physicians Trained in International Medical Schools  
Finance Committee  
February 17, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council **supports Senate Bill 489 - Health Occupations - Physicians Trained in International Medical Schools**. Senate Bill 489 updates Maryland's physician licensure framework to better recognize the qualifications of physicians who completed their medical education outside the United States. The bill allows the State Board of Physicians to consider accredited postgraduate medical training as an alternative pathway to licensure and requires newly licensed internationally trained physicians to practice under supervision during their initial licensure period. These changes would take effect on October 1, 2026.

Maryland continues to face significant challenges in ensuring adequate access to health care, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Many residents in these areas experience long wait times for appointments, limited access to primary and behavioral health services, and difficulty retaining providers. These challenges have intensified in recent years as workforce shortages, provider burnout, and population aging place additional strain on an already stretched healthcare system.

Federal workforce data illustrates the scope of the problem. As of December 31, 2025, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) reported that Maryland continues to have extensive areas designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas. According to HRSA estimates, the state would need approximately 284 additional primary care practitioners to eliminate primary care shortage designations and about 81 additional mental health providers to address all mental health shortage areas. These shortages are particularly acute in rural regions, where access to consistent care is often limited.

Internationally trained physicians represent a highly skilled and underutilized workforce that can help address these gaps. Senate Bill 489 offers a balanced approach by reducing unnecessary licensure barriers while maintaining patient safety through supervised practice requirements. By enabling qualified physicians to enter the workforce more efficiently, the bill supports healthcare delivery in communities that have historically struggled to recruit and retain providers.

By modernizing licensure standards and expanding the physician pipeline, Senate Bill 489 strengthens Maryland's healthcare system, supports overburdened providers, and improves access to care for patients across the state.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 489.



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 518 - Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program - Establishment  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
February 25, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 518 - Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program - Establishment. This bill creates a pilot program to offer free, confidential, one-on-one financial counseling and education to low- and moderate-income Maryland residents. This pilot program seeks to empower individuals with the tools they need to manage their finances effectively, reduce debt, improve credit, and build a stronger financial foundation for the future.

By establishing a network of Financial Empowerment Centers (FECs) throughout the state, Senate Bill 518 ensures that communities, especially those in rural areas, have access to crucial financial services that are often difficult to obtain. For many Maryland residents, access to affordable financial counseling is limited, and this program aims to bridge that gap by providing essential services at no cost to those who need them most.

This program is not only beneficial for individual participants but also promotes economic stability and growth within local economies. As more individuals gain financial literacy and improve their financial well-being, they are better equipped to make sound financial decisions, manage debt, and increase savings. This, in turn, can stimulate local economies by increasing spending and demand for goods and services, benefiting small businesses and communities across the state.

Furthermore, the Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program will allow the state to evaluate the program's effectiveness and gather data to determine how financial counseling can contribute to long-term financial stability for participants. If successful, this pilot could serve as the foundation for expanding these services to a larger portion of the population, further promoting financial empowerment throughout Maryland.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 518.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 530 - Aging-in-Place Programs - Grants - Multigenerational Third Places (The Village  
Multigenerational Third Places Act)  
Finance Committee  
March 11, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 530 - Aging-in-Place Programs - Grants - Multigenerational Third Places (The Village Multigenerational Third Places Act). Senate Bill 530 authorizes the Maryland Department of Aging to provide grants to nonprofit organizations and Area Agencies on Aging to strengthen aging-in-place programs and support social engagement through multigenerational third places. By expanding allowable uses of existing grant authority, the bill enables community-based organizations to create or enhance welcoming spaces where residents of all ages can gather, connect, and support one another. This legislation provides a thoughtful framework for strengthening community ties while helping older adults remain in their homes and neighborhoods.

Promoting aging in place requires more than housing and health support, it also requires meaningful social connection. Research consistently shows that prolonged isolation among older adults is associated with poorer physical health, increased rates of depression and anxiety, cognitive decline, and higher health care costs. By supporting opportunities for intergenerational interaction and community participation, SB 530 addresses these challenges proactively. Investing in social infrastructure today can reduce more intensive and costly interventions in the future.

This proposal is particularly meaningful for rural communities across Maryland. Geographic distance, limited transportation options, and fewer centralized gathering spaces can intensify isolation for older residents. Rural communities often rely on trusted local institutions, such as senior centers, libraries, faith-based organizations, and small nonprofits, to serve as hubs of connection. However, these organizations frequently operate with constrained budgets and limited staff capacity. Grant support through the Maryland General Assembly's authorization would help sustain and expand the kinds of multigenerational gathering spaces that are essential in rural areas.

Senate Bill 530 takes a practical and community-driven approach. By encouraging collaboration across generations and strengthening neighborhood-based support, the bill reinforces Maryland's commitment to helping residents age with dignity, independence, and connection.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 530



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 558 - Chesapeake Bay - Enhancement Program and Maryland Seafood Industry Financial  
Assistance Fund - Established  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
April 1, 2026

**The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 558 - Chesapeake Bay - Enhancement Program and Maryland Seafood Industry Financial Assistance Fund - Established as amended.** SB 558 creates a new statewide initiative within the Maryland Department of Natural Resources focused on rebuilding oyster populations and addressing environmental impacts linked to major development activities. The program is intended to direct resources toward areas of the Chesapeake Bay where oyster habitat has been disrupted, using restoration strategies such as reef rebuilding and the placement of young oysters to strengthen long-term population health. The bill was recently amended to authorize the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) to issue emergency loans to watermen, providing crucial support to the seafood industry while advancing ecological restoration.

Under this approach, restoration efforts would be guided by scientific data and coordinated planning, with funding dedicated to improving habitat conditions and supporting oyster survival. By establishing a formal structure in law, the State can ensure these efforts continue consistently over time rather than relying on temporary or informal arrangements. This creates a clearer connection between environmental impacts and the investments needed to address them.

Maryland's oyster industry has faced increasing pressure in recent years due to environmental variability, market shifts, and extreme weather, all of which have reduced harvest opportunities and created uncertainty for watermen. These conditions underscore the need for proactive measures to strengthen resilience and promote stability within the industry.

Despite these challenges, the seafood sector remains a significant contributor to Maryland's economy. According to the 2025 Report on the Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy, prepared by the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation and the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University, the industry generates approximately \$317.4 million in economic activity, representing 1.1% of total resource-based industry output. It supports 3,014 jobs (2.8% of employment in these sectors) and produces over \$11.9 million in state and local tax revenue. These figures do not fully reflect the continued growth of aquaculture. The industry also remains central to many coastal communities, with oysters playing a critical role in both ecosystem function and the viability of working waterfronts.

By investing in oyster restoration tied to environmental impacts, SB 558 advances a practical approach that supports both ecological health and economic sustainability. Strengthening oyster populations improves water quality, enhances habitat, and helps maintain a stable foundation for Maryland's seafood industry.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support as of SB 558 as amended.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 770 - Economic Development - Maryland's Future Board - Establishment  
Finance Committee  
March 5, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **Senate Bill 770 - Economic Development - Maryland's Future Board - Establishment**. Senate Bill 770 establishes Maryland's Future Board within the Maryland Department of Commerce to develop and maintain a long-term, forward-looking economic development strategy for our State. It also creates Maryland's Future Fund as a non-lapsing fund to support that work. Importantly, the bill does not shift decision-making authority away from the Governor or the Maryland General Assembly; instead, it strengthens their ability to act strategically by providing thoughtful analysis, coordination, and clear recommendations for high-impact investments.

Maryland's economy is diverse and interconnected. Growth in one region often supports opportunity in another. Senate Bill 770 encourages a more deliberate and coordinated approach to economic development. By establishing a board specifically tasked with identifying long-range priorities, the legislation promotes smarter planning around infrastructure, workforce development, industry recruitment, and innovation.

As Maryland plans for long-term economic growth, inclusion of agricultural representation on the Board would further strengthen this effort by ensuring that one of the State's foundational industries is fully integrated into its forward-looking strategy. Agriculture today extends well beyond traditional production and increasingly intersects with biotechnology, indoor and controlled-environment agriculture, precision technologies, and unmanned systems. These sectors are fundamental components of Maryland's innovation economy and are especially vital to rural prosperity. Recognizing agriculture's evolving role within the State's broader economic landscape would enhance the Board's ability to develop a comprehensive, future-oriented strategy.

For communities across the State, including rural areas, this kind of structure provides clarity and stability. Strategic investments in broadband, transportation, site development, and workforce partnerships require sustained attention and coordination. A dedicated board can help ensure those efforts are aligned, data-driven, and responsive to regional needs, rather than fragmented or reactive.

The creation of a nonlapsing fund is also an important feature of the bill. Meaningful economic development projects often take multiple years to plan and implement. A funding structure that carries forward from year to year allows Maryland to pursue transformative initiatives without being constrained by short-term fiscal cycles. That stability increases confidence for businesses, local governments, and private partners considering long-term investments in the State.

Ultimately, Senate Bill 770 is about strengthening Maryland's capacity to compete and grow responsibly. It provides a framework for collaboration, accountability, and sustained planning while preserving legislative oversight. By taking a proactive and coordinated approach to economic development, this bill helps position Maryland for long-term prosperity and resilience.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 770.



Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 826 - Income Tax - Angel Investor Tax Credit for Investments in Emergent Technology  
Budget and Taxation Committee  
March 4, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports **Senate Bill 826 - Income Tax - Angel Investor Tax Credit for Investments in Emergent Technology**. Senate Bill 826 creates a meaningful opportunity to strengthen Maryland's innovation economy by encouraging private investment in emerging, high-impact industries. By establishing an Angel Investor Tax Credit for investments in emergent technology companies, the bill helps reduce early-stage risk and makes it more attractive for Maryland investors to support Maryland entrepreneurs.

Many of the industries shaping Maryland's future are deeply interconnected. Indoor agriculture, for example, is not simply about growing food indoors, it brings together environmental science, energy efficiency, data systems, and advanced facility design. These operations often serve as platforms for research, workforce development, and supply chain innovation.

Biotechnology is another area where Maryland has long demonstrated leadership. From laboratory research to bio-manufacturing and applied plant science, biotech enterprises require significant upfront capital before products reach market. Early-stage investors are often the difference between promising research remaining in a lab and becoming a scalable enterprise that creates jobs and attracts follow-on investment. Senate Bill 826 helps close that gap by incentivizing those first critical dollars.

Advanced automation and robotics also play a supporting role in many of these sectors, improving efficiency, precision, and safety in production and distribution environments. Likewise, transportation and logistics technologies help ensure that products developed or grown in Maryland move efficiently through regional and national markets. Together, these industries reinforce one another and contribute to a broader ecosystem of innovation.

For communities across the State, including rural areas and emerging innovation corridors, access to early-stage capital can determine whether transformative projects take root locally or move elsewhere. Facilities tied to indoor agriculture, biotechnology, and related technologies require substantial investment in infrastructure, workforce training, and research capacity. Encouraging angel investment helps anchor these projects in Maryland and strengthens long-term economic stability.

By lowering barriers to early-stage investment and supporting growth in sectors such as biotechnology, indoor agriculture, and advanced technology systems, this bill enhances Maryland's competitiveness and resilience.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 826.



*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

March 10, 2026

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 875 - Oysters - Rotational Harvest - Pilot Program

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

**The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 875 - Oysters - Rotational Harvest - Pilot Program.** SB 875 establishes a rotational oyster harvest pilot program to be administered by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources in designated areas of the Chesapeake Bay. The program would allow the Department to open and close oyster bars on a rotating basis while implementing science-based monitoring and requiring shell replacement proportional to harvested bushels.

The pilot would operate from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2032, in four regions: the Lower Choptank River, Lower Main Stem Chesapeake Bay, Herring Bay, and Lower Chester River. Prior to opening an area for harvest, the Department must conduct baseline environmental and biological surveys assessing oyster density, disease prevalence, habitat conditions, and water quality. Monitoring would continue after harvest closures to evaluate ecological outcomes and guide future management decisions.

Participation would be limited to individuals holding valid Tidal Fisheries Licenses with oyster authorizations, while the Department retains authority to establish catch limits, gear restrictions, season dates, and other harvest parameters to ensure conservation objectives are met. Harvesters participating in the program must also return an equivalent volume of oyster shell to the bar from which oysters were taken, helping maintain reef substrate and support future spat settlement.

By December 1, 2031, the Department must submit a report to the Governor and the General Assembly summarizing findings and providing recommendations regarding continuation, modification, or termination of the rotational harvest model.

SB 875 represents a balanced, science-driven approach that supports both ecological restoration and Maryland's working waterfront communities. Historically, the Chesapeake Bay oyster fishery was one of the most productive in the world, but the industry has experienced significant decline due to overharvesting, habitat loss, and disease, resulting in a substantial reduction in both oyster populations and the economic activity associated with the fishery.

Recent events have further strained the industry. In February 2026, Maryland officials requested a federal fishery disaster declaration for the Chesapeake Bay oyster industry following a combination of extreme winter weather, environmental disruptions, and declining market demand that significantly reduced harvest opportunities and depressed oyster prices (Maryland Matters, Feb. 27, 2026).



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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Despite these challenges, the seafood industry remains an important component of Maryland's resource-based economy. According to the 2025 Report on the Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy, prepared by the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) and the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) at Salisbury University, Maryland's seafood industry contributed approximately \$317.4 million to the state's economy, representing 1.1% of the total impact from resource-based industries. The sector supported 3,014 jobs (or 2.8% of total RBI employment) and generated over \$11.9 million in state and local tax revenue (accounting for 1.1% of the total RBI tax contribution). It's important to note that the aquaculture sector, which has seen significant growth in recent years, is not fully included in these impact estimates for the seafood industry.

By testing rotational harvest strategies under controlled conditions, the State can gather meaningful data to inform future oyster management policy while sustaining economic activity tied to the Chesapeake Bay and supporting the livelihoods of Maryland's watermen and coastal communities.

For these reasons, the Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of SB 875.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Davis  
RMC Executive Director