

Smarter Growth Alliance for Howard County

May 14, 2021

The Honorable Howard County Council
George Howard Building
3430 Court House Drive
Ellicott City, MD 21043

RE: CB42-2021: AN ACT requiring the Department of Planning and Zoning, in collaboration with specified County agencies, to establish a system of data collection; requiring the Department of Planning and Zoning, in collaboration with specified County agencies, to recommend actions to improve the retention of existing forest areas and effectiveness of mitigation measures; and generally relating to the Forest Conservation Act.

Dear Council Members:

The Smarter Growth Alliance for Howard County (SGAHC) is an alliance of local and state organizations collaborating to foster healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities through smarter development and transportation decisions and improved protections for the county's natural, historic and cultural resources.

We support Bill 42-2021 and enthusiastically support the intent to provide a feedback loop that can ensure ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of CB 69-2019, the Forest Conservation Act. However, we would also welcome strengthening amendments to Bill 42-2021.

Passing CB 69-2019 was a historic achievement of this council and the administration. This bill may significantly improve the conservation of forests, the way we intelligently develop our county, and the quality of life of our county residents. Hundreds of acres of trees were lost unnecessarily during the 20+ years leading up to the passage of CB 69-2019. The lack of comprehensive forest legislation resulted in a decline in air quality, a reduction in carbon sequestration, increased flooding due to inadequate stormwater management, a loss of habitat and biodiversity, as well as a loss of places where one can reconnect to nature for its restorative mental health effects. These harmful effects highlight the importance of revisiting such significant legislation. The forest legislation this council wisely passed in 2019 has the potential to reverse the loss of those forest benefits and set the county on a brighter path into the future. An act of such importance demands periodic checkups on its effectiveness. CB42-2021 is a vital step to ensure that the 2019 forest legislation functions as intended.

*Audubon MD-DC • Audubon Society of Central Maryland • Bicycling Advocates of Howard County
Chesapeake Bay Foundation • Clean Water Action • Coalition for Smarter Growth • Community Ecology Institute
Earth Forum of Howard County • HARP • Howard County Citizens Association
Howard County Conservancy • Howard County Sierra Club • Maryland Conservation Council
Maryland League of Conservation Voters • Maryland Ornithological Society • Patapsco Heritage Greenway
Preservation Maryland • Safe Skies Maryland • Savage Community Association • The People's Voice • Transition Howard County*

While we support Bill 42-2021 as written, we have two recommended considerations to make the bill even stronger:

- 1) While we support this bill to advance the effectiveness of forest conservation in the county, understand the need for Howard County agencies to have a suitable time to gather and fully assess the effectiveness data, we would also support measures to make it even stronger. **We support measures that founded, reported, and solved problems before March 31, 2026.** We recommend considering alternatives to an earlier due date of the report or other measures such as a preliminary interim report to the council and the public. Seven years is a long time to wait for an identified problem when it needs to be addressed promptly. We want to ensure there is ample ability for the Departments of Planning and Zoning, Recreation of Parks, along with the Office of Community Sustainability, to have the policy tools they need to conserve Howard county's precious forest resources.
- 2) We would appreciate additional specificity of the kind of data to be collected. We ask to have a full assessment of both the qualitatively and quantitatively effectiveness of the bill. We understand the need for flexibility in the evaluation and reporting to ensure that we can get the whole picture of how effective our forest policies are in the county. We also understand the capacity constraints and procedures of the agencies tasked to carry out Bill 42-2021. Since the Departments of Planning and Zoning, Recreation of Parks, along with the Office of Community Sustainability, have agreed to collaborate on the collection and evaluation of data, we would support consulting with them to explore if any additional minimal data collection points would be feasible.

A great deal of administrative effort and public involvement went into the development of the new Forest Conservation Act and its Implementation Manual. We applaud this council for its past and present efforts to continue improvements in forest conservation and management in the county. We support CB42-2021 and would support efforts to strengthen the amendment further in collaboration with the appropriate agencies. This bill can assure the effort invested produces the desired current outcome and will continue to do so in the future.

Sincerely,

Preservation Maryland
Ruby Nwaebube
Advocacy Associate

The People's Voice
Lisa Markovitz
President

Howard County Citizen's Association
Stu Kohn
President

Savage Community Association
Susan Garber
Director

cc: The Honorable Calvin Ball, County Executive