

Great Maryland Trails Act – 2/29/24 1 pm

House Environment and Transportation Committee

Room 250

Thank you, members, of the committee. My name is Owen Bailey and I'm the Director of Land Use and Policy for Eastern Shore Land Conservancy as well as the Chair of the Eastern Shore Trail Network Steering Committee. I am here in support of HB0530.

For the past two years, Eastern Shore Land Conservancy has led an effort to advocate for the benefits of trails, encourage our local governments to make trail planning and development a priority and help connect them to opportunities and resources. The Eastern Shore has far fewer trails than the rest of the state and indeed the rest of the mid-Atlantic region. Part of the reason is the lack of capacity and experience in our small rural local governments. ESLC and the other members of our Steering Committee, which represent each of the counties on the Eastern Shore, have stepped in to help fill this gap, but we can only do so much.

An Office of Trails would provide immense technical assistance for our counties, towns, and communities and would help us realize the power that trails bring.

The value trails bring might seem so simple and basic, but that is because of one important fact. Humans were built to walk and yet over the past 2-3 generations we have systemically developed our communities to not only discourage walking but to make it deadly. As we have shaped our built environment, we have given priority to motor vehicles and have left out everyone who is either not old enough or too old to drive, cannot afford to own and maintain a car, or cannot physically or mentally operate a car. These are the people who are left behind without safe access to schools, parks, grocery stores, places of employment, or other basic needs and services.

Trails can help us reverse this trend and fix the wrongs of the past. Trails bring equitable access, options, opportunities, and economic development. Trails bring value and a huge return on investment that pays dividends into the future. Trails allow for the only truly free form of transportation – walking.

As the state looks at the future struggles of climate change, housing, and financing – trails must be a part of the solution. And we need the state's help to build an interconnected trail network.