



March 13, 2021

**PARTNERS for
OPEN SPACE**

Rural Maryland Council
Charlotte Davis, co-Chair

**Chesapeake
Conservancy**
Joel Dunn, co-Chair

Grow and Fortify
Kelly Dudeck

**Baltimore County Land
Trust Alliance**
Ann Jones

**Chesapeake Bay
Commission**
Mark Hoffman

The Conservation Fund
Bill Crouch

Preservation Maryland
Nick Redding

The Nature Conservancy
Deborah Barber

**Maryland Association of
County Parks and
Recreation
Administrators**
Sue Simmons

**Maryland League of
Conservation Voters**
Kristen Harbeson

**Maryland Recreation
and Parks Association**
Chuck Montrie

**Forever Maryland
Foundation**
Wendy Stringfellow

**Southern Maryland
Heritage Area
Consortium**
Lucille Walker

Trust for Public Land
Kent Whitehead

**Eastern Shore Land
Conservancy**
Jim Bass

The Honorable Larry Hogan
Governor
State of Maryland
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401-1925

The Honorable Adrienne Jones
Speaker of the House
Maryland House of Delegates
H-101 State House
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401-1925

The Honorable Bill Ferguson
President
Maryland Senate
H-107 State House
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Annapolis, MD 21401-1925

Dear Governor Hogan, Speaker Jones, and President Ferguson,

On behalf of Partners for Open Space, we write with urgency to express our strong opposition to the recommendation by the Department of Legislative Services to eliminate \$218.2 million in scheduled repayments for Program Open Space – a recommendation adopted this week by the House Appropriations Capital Budget Subcommittee.

Thanks to Program Open Space, Maryland has a strong portfolio of public parks and open space which contribute significantly to the quality of life of Marylanders. Parks strengthen communities, attract and retain residents, promote public health, and fuel spending on outdoor recreation which adds billions of dollars each year to Maryland's economy. However, despite Maryland's historic success in funding parks and open space, there are still many underserved communities that lack access to open space and greatly need funding for park and recreation maintenance and facilities.

As you know, Program Open Space and a suite of preservation programs are funded through Maryland's real estate transfer tax – a dedicated source of revenue to support Maryland's state and local parks, agricultural and forest preservation, and the Maryland Heritage Areas program. In the past twenty years, more than **\$1 billion** in Program Open Space funding was diverted to the General Fund. In 2016, the House and the Senate voted unanimously to repay a portion of diverted funds back to Program Open Space. While these repayments have often been pushed forward, we contend that repayments must still be made to balance historic cuts to Program Open Space.

We acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Maryland's budget, and we thank you for your leadership to protect the health, safety, and economic well-being of Marylanders over the past year. We must also underscore the important role that parks and open space have played in providing Marylanders with a safe way to recreate during the pandemic. State park visitation reached an astounding 20 million in 2020, up from 14 million in 2019. Demand for open space and pressures on Maryland's natural areas and farmland by development will continue to increase.

The Partners for Open Space understand that two new developments are re-shaping discussions around Maryland's FY 22 budget: 1.) the revised estimates from the Board of Revenue Estimates that project an increase of \$299 million in state revenue for FY 22, and 2.) the \$1.9 trillion federal stimulus package expected to bring an additional \$3.8 billion in funding to Maryland.

We believe that the recommendation by the Department of Legislative Services to eliminate Program Open Space repayments is short-sighted, given the huge increase in demand by Marylanders for parks and open space, as well as the many demonstrated economic, environmental, and public health benefits that result from Program Open Space investments.

As you consider Maryland's budget for FY 22, we respectfully urge you to reject the proposal by the Department of Legislative Services to eliminate the \$218.2 million in Program Open Space repayments. We ask you to defer the schedule of repayments by one year, to FY 23. We are confident that, should the General Assembly maintain these repayments, the state, local governments, and stakeholders could identify ways to direct these funds to meet the urgent needs of state and local parks and to boost Maryland's open space which is critical to local economies, public health, and the economy.

We thank you for your past support for Program Open Space, and we appreciate your consideration of this letter.

Sincerely,



Joel Dunn, Co-chair
Partners for Open Space



Charlotte Davis, Co-chair
Partners for Open Space