

**Testimony of Jeffrey P. Schomig Before the Anne Arundel County Council on October 7, 2019**

**on behalf of**

**The Severn River Association**

**In Support of Bill 68-19 (Forest Conservation Act)**

Dear Chairman Pruski and Councilmembers,

My name is Jeff Schomig. I have lived in Anne Arundel County for most of the past 37-years. I currently reside in Arnold, Maryland. I am a former Commissioner on the county government's Severn River Commission, having been appointed and twice re-appointed by County Executives of both political parties. I am currently a member of the Severn River Association's board of directors and I co-chair the board's advocacy committee. I testify tonight, on behalf of SRA, in strong support of Bill 68-19.

The Severn River Association is America's oldest river conservation group. Concerned citizens established SRA in 1911 to address environmental degradation of the surrounding watershed and resultant degradation of the Severn's water quality. In 1912, pollution in the Severn caused the State to close the Severn to commercial oyster harvesting. SRA has since worked continuously to support conservation, ecosystem repair and education about this natural jewel. This work has included ecological restoration of streams and shorelines and planting over 45 million oysters to restore the Severn's depleted reefs.

Today, SRA is comprised of individual citizens, and over seventy community associations and business throughout the Severn - a watershed that includes six of the seven council districts.

I will not rehash the testimony you have received about the well-documented ecological and economic benefit of a thick, robust tree canopy. Suffice it to say that these benefits are so vast and significant that SRA's hard work to restore oysters, shoreline habitat and improve the Severn's usability for fisherman, swimmers, boaters and visitors is in serious jeopardy due to the rapid forest loss over the past decade. Oysters, for example, require steady flows of clean fresh water such that runs off forested land. Sudden torrents of hot, urbanized freshwater from artificial stormwater devices on cleared land kills oysters and degrades water quality, putting to waste millions of dollars in restoration effort. It would be tragic if the enormously popular Severn oyster restoration efforts – efforts widely reported in local and national press – came to an end due to continued clear cutting in the watershed.

Enthusiastic support from our board and members for forest conservation is not surprising. With respect to Bill 68-19 (the Forest Conservation Act, or "FCA"), the primary concern expressed by many of our members is that it does not go far enough to protect forests. SRA does not support exemptions to the FCA for government development projects or interest groups, such as private schools, religious organizations or utilities. We are quickly running out of meaningful parcels of forest to conserve. Schools, churches and utilities could clear huge areas of forests if not incentivized to repurpose existing hardened or cleared land. All of us need the incentive to develop land that does not require forest clearing if the FCA is to have the intended conservation impact.

I will close my testimony with the following observations about the FCA:

- SRA hopes that the FCA will become a companion to an effort by the county to further incentivize redevelopment of the hundreds of paved, cleared parcels throughout this county in need of redevelopment. Currently, nearly all development is focused on wooded land. From both an economic and environmental perspective, public incentives should promote the opposite of the current development pattern.
- Credible data does not support clear cutting more forests to address affordable housing. Developers have had decades to clear forests with relative impunity. Were this the answer to affordable housing or fiscal solvency for the county, we would have both in spades by now. Instead, house prices have risen and the county continues to fall behind on infrastructure and public resources.
- The increased fee-in-lieu associated with the FCA is unlikely to pass on to consumers. Developers' threats to pass this to consumers would require us to believe that developers and builders are not already charging the maximum price the market can bear. The more likely scenario is that these fees would modestly reduce development profits; if they could simply be passed on, developers would not be up in arms over the FCA. Given the political and economic sway the development industry has held over this county, this council should not consider further economic protection of developers to be a consideration in its FCA debate.
- The FCA is not a radical protection effort, nor does it impinge on property rights as established by the Maryland and U.S. Constitutions. It is only painted as radical by some when compared to the nearly complete abdication of meaningful conservation incentives by this county to date. The FCA still allows for substantial use and enjoyment of private property, including significant economic benefit.

Take a drive down any major road in the Severn watershed or elsewhere in this county. Look at how many forests have been removed in just the last several years, forever altering the character and ecology of entire regions. Notice how many forests are either being clear-cut or are for sale to be bulldozed. Observe how nearly all development activity is focused on forests, whose attraction to development results from county policies that artificially shield developers from the societal costs of such development while passing those costs to taxpayers.

This needs to end. It would be incredible if, even as this County loses its last stands of forest while a gold rush mentality causes every remaining lot to be targeted for bulldozing, that this Council could seriously debate the need for meaningful forest conservation incentives at least as robust as those contained in the FCA. The SRA urges you to pass the FCA now, without special exemptions, for the good of the citizens you represent.

Respectfully,

Jeffrey P. Schomig  
Director  
Severn River Association