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NEW LEGISLATION WOULD IMPROVE OVERSIGHT AND CLOSE LOOPHOLES IN PUBLIC INFORMATION ACT LAW

Senator Raskin, Delegate Cullison Propose First Major Update to Law in 45 Years

(Annapolis, MD) - Good government organizations, public health groups, environmental organizations, consumer advocates and social justice organizations applauded the introduction of new legislation to update the Maryland Public Information Act of 1970. The legislation would update the Maryland Public Information Act and remove obstacles to public access to public records by limiting and standardizing fees, improving oversight and closing exemption loopholes. The bill, [SB695](#) is sponsored by Senator Jamie Raskin (District 20) and will be cross-filed in the House of Delegates by Delegate Bonnie Cullison (District 19).

“Democracy is built on transparency, and Marylanders need total access to our own government,” said Senator Jamie Raskin.

“We’re always striving to do better in Maryland,” said Delegate Bonnie Cullison. “In this digital age when limitless information is only a click away, there is no excuse to keep Marylanders in the dark.”

The legislation would address three key components of Maryland’s existing laws regarding transparency and open government. The bill would:

- **Limit and standardize fees** that local governments charge for Public Information Act (PIA) requests. Advocates say that inconsistent fees across state agencies are sometimes so high they deter reasonable requests.
- **Improve oversight** by requiring faster PIA responses and designating a citizen Public Information Act Compliance Board to hear appeals.
- **Close loopholes in its exemptions** by making public all official documents from entities that receive tax credits or direct subsidies and establishing a “balance test” to

determine whether existing exemptions to the PIA law are actually in the public interest.

More than two-dozen nonprofit organizations are championing the bill as an important step forward for Maryland. [Marylanders for Open Government](#) is a diverse network of environmental organizations, public health groups, good government groups, consumer advocates and social justice organizations working together to pass this legislation.

“Sadly, important information is too often inaccessible to the public,” said Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, executive director of Common Cause Maryland. “Why can’t we get information about public officials’ decision making processes or the specifics of a government expenditure? This lack of access and government accountability threatens Marylanders’ public health and civil liberties.”

“Information needs to be open and searchable so the public and lawmakers can see how budget and policy decisions affect specific groups of people,” said Heather Iliff, president and CEO of Maryland Nonprofits. “Nonprofit organizations need access to government data to track their outcomes and provide better service to their communities.”

“Reporters need access to public records and information to tell their stories and hold the government accountable,” said Rebecca Snyder, executive director of the Maryland, Delaware, DC Press Association. “When Public Information Act requests are ignored or denied without just cause, the media loses its chance to serve as a proper watchdog.”

“Government agencies in Maryland have increasingly been charging excessive and arbitrary fees for public access to public records,” said Tom Pelton, director of communications for the Environmental Integrity Project. “This ‘pay to play’ for public records is an abuse of the Maryland Public Information Act, and it discourages community groups, environmentalists, journalists and others from making legitimate inquiries into what their government is up to. We need reform.”

Advocates are tweeting about the bill using #MdOpenGov.

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Marylanders for Open Government a network of diverse organizations connected by an interest in demanding fair and open access to government-funded data and information. Members of the network include environmental and public health groups, good government groups, consumer advocates and social justice organizations. More information and a list of member organizations can be found at www.MdOpenGov.org