The Town of Washington Grove
P. O. Box 216
300 Grove Avenue
Washington Grove, MD 20880
voice: 301-926-22566
email: mayor@washingtongrovemd.gov

February 13, 2026

To: **House Economic Committee**
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

From: Town of Washington Grove, District 39

Re: HB0239: Starter and Silver Homes Act of 2026
Position: Opposed without significant amendment

The Town of Washington Grove recently celebrated 150 years since its inception as a Methodist Camp Meeting community, and has carefully preserved and adapted its original form and character to successfully meet the changing demands over the years. The small town of 225 houses has a town meeting form of government and has been on the National Register of Historic Places for over 50 years recognized as a historic district with significance for its unique town plan, its high concentration of period houses, its representation of the Methodist history, and integration of historic landscape features.

We recognize the dire need for affordable housing and both the consequences of exclusionary zoning and the opportunities apparent in overturning it. Care must be taken to retain any clear benefits while attempting to fix the inherent problems. Washington Grove has been positively shaped by consciously making decisions about its growth. To that end, we offer the following:

Though clearly a significant historic resource, the Town does not qualify for the historic district exemption
The Town is unusual in its organization as well, having only 1 ½ employees and depending on volunteers to fulfill its other municipal responsibilities. We have been successfully operating as a form of historic district that relies on voluntary respect of published Historic Design Guidelines identified by a Historic Preservation Commission but, due to our dependence on voluntary labor, have not defined a separate district with regulatory authority. Our recent update of our national Register Registration was recognized by the Maryland Historic Preservation Office as an outstanding example of justification for historic district listing. However, we do not qualify for the exemption defined in this proposed bill. This may apply to other small municipalities as well.

The exemption recognizes the intrinsic negative impacts of the proposed bill on the scale and character of historic districts.
However, by setting a date in the past for qualifying as a historic district, it exhibits a hostility to many of the reasons for establishing one and unfairly inhibits potential establishing one in the future. This impacts both our Town's long term goal of complying with section 8-105, as well as the goals of other small towns. The drafting of the bill has been done without proper review and input form the entities impacted.

We suggest eliminating the date of July 1, 2025 entirely, and allowing formation of historic districts in the traditional organic fashion.

The mandated 5000 sf minimum lot size is a blunt instrument that can wreak havoc on existing town plans.
Our original Town Plan is identified as one of its character-defining elements and was based on 7500 sf lots. Thus, the scale of the development is already fairly dense, but the density could be increased if recognition of the underlying structure of the original lot size is allowed. Its surprising that the bill seems to imply that one size fits all. *We recommend flexibility in the assignment of maximum lot sizes.*

The mandated maximum front setback is an equally blunt instrument with a similarly dire impact on town plans.
Much care has been devoted over time to constructing consistent common spaces that develop community pride and social interactions. This is true for the Washington Grove streetscapes that are defined by houses with porches fronting on walking paths. This encourages the social contract of a common setting for establishing casual bonds amongst the residents and visitors. This commons would be severely disrupted by the introduction of houses not sharing the social construct. The other setbacks have implications for practical and environmental impacts but not as much on the shared value of the front setback. *We recommend honoring the local determination of front setbacks and eliminating this mandate.*

The prohibition on maximum lot coverage reduces the local ability to restrain mansionization.
The Town of Washington Grove has recognized the common modest scale of its houses as one of the principal elements of its historic integrity. We encourage small houses on small lots and discourage large houses by means of the lot coverage maximum and a floor area ratio (FAR) regulation. This has helped to control development that maximizes the size of an individual house.

The by-right construction of townhouses on any lot is another blunt instrument that denies any analysis of the impacts on the character of a neighborhood.
Washington Grove values both the scale of its built environment and the planning process that forms it. There can be areas of the town plan that accept this scale of development but relying on the market to determine the shape of a town rather than conscious deliberation of the pros and cons is foolhoardy. We have learned much about town planning over the years and it would be ill-advised to throw out the wisdom for an apparently simple solution. *We advise eliminating such a simplistic mandate as this.*

The by-right ability to subdivide into 3 lots by itself ignores the impacts on the surrounding neighborhood.
If combined with an analysis of the underlying structure of a neighborhood, this measure could indeed result in more developable lots and lead to improvement of that structure. For example, in Washington Grove, if the historic lot size of 7500 sf was honored, subdivision would naturally follow the grain of the existing development, rather than be at odds with it. Flexibility seems to bear better fruit in planning than singular inflexible rules. *We advise conditioning this subdivision mandate to fit the individual planning context.*

The prohibition of architectural controls is short sighted if the quality of development is valued at all.
The residents recognize that the value of Washington Grove rests with the things they hold in common. Some of that common value is the result of how the houses talk to each other, and how they share a common story that helps build strong community cohesion. This results in an increase in value for all. Accommodating an increased number of residents does not have to be at the expense of the community's shared value, it can actually help increase that value. *We recommend not tying the hands of municipalities in their work of building communities.*

The ***2030 Housing Production Targets for the State of Maryland*** discusses working with the counties and municipalities to mutually overcome the housing deficit. This is a hopeful and useful document. Making these goals mutual is a basic planning tool that engages the stakeholders in a common fight as partners. The planning benefit from partnership is not achieved with easy mandates that place trust in market forces to fix a problem and fail to take the complexities of context into consideration. These mandates instead breed adversarial relationships with those it relies on to carry them out.

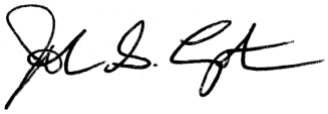
The document points out that only 0.4% of the housing deficit is born by 41 small towns. Washington Grove is one of them. It also declares that those towns will not bear the burden of solving the problem, but will be protected as they are. This bill is in direct conflict with that goal. It is a one-size-fits-all approach to a complex issue. We are more than willing to work with the Department of Housing and Community Development to find ways to accomplish both our goals – to increase housing in our town AND to protect its historic integrity. *This bill is not the way to do that.*

Please allow the time to craft a sensitively designed bill that takes the more mature approach of working with the counties and towns together for the benefit of all.

Thanks for your consideration,



Robert Booher
Chair, Washington Grove
Historic Preservation Commission



John G. Compton
Mayor, Washington Grove



Georgette Cole
Chair, Planning Commission
Washington Grove