

CHAPTER 11: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Public participation in and support of Maryland's Critical Area Program is essential to its success and ultimately to the restoration of Maryland's Bays. Citizens who are knowledgeable about the regulations can ensure that local Critical Area programs are properly implemented and enforced. Interested citizens can also get involved in the required updates to local programs, making sure they are accomplished in a timely manner and that confusing or ineffectual provisions are changed. Contacting local officials and legislators also ensures the long-term effectiveness of Maryland's Critical Area Program. Elected officials want to hear that Maryland residents support regulations that protect the Bays and their ecosystems and that citizens are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to ensure clean, biologically diverse, and productive waterways for the future.

Involvement in Local Decision-Making

All Maryland citizens can participate in the restoration of the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays in a significant way that is often overlooked. Every week, across the State, local planning commissions, appeals boards, town councils, and county commissioners meet and make important decisions that affect land use and development. These decisions range from approving a variance allowing a homeowner to add on to a waterfront home to approving a major planned unit development involving hundreds of new homes and thousands of square feet of commercial space. Often these decisions directly affect water quality and plant and wildlife habitat in Maryland's protected watersheds.

Local elected and appointed officials are interested in the concerns of their constituents, particularly on important issues such as the environment and

- *Contacting State legislators ensures that elected officials know that Maryland residents support regulations that protect the Bays.*



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- *Members of the public can comment on projects that are taking place in their communities and express their concern about potential adverse environmental impacts.*

the restoration of Maryland's Bays. Moreover, local governments are required by law to publicize meetings involving significant land use decisions by placing legal notices in the local newspaper. Often agendas for these meetings are posted on local governments' websites. In almost all cases, these decisions include opportunities for public comment. Members of the public can participate in the decision-making process by testifying at a public meeting, writing a letter, or sending an e-mail. Quite often, public testimony in favor of or against a particular project will have a significant impact on the decision. Citizen comments may also lead to design changes that result in the construction of the project in a more environmentally sensitive manner and minimize or avoid impacts to sensitive resources.

In addition to participating in the project review process, local governments are required to review and update their local Critical Area programs every six years. Some counties and towns appoint a citizens' advisory group to assist with this effort, and this

provides an opportunity for citizens to work directly with planners on local Critical Area regulations. Most jurisdictions propose amendments to their programs as part of this review, and this involves one or more public hearings. Hearing attendance and testimony on important issues keeps local officials attuned to the importance of the local Critical Area programs to residents of their jurisdictions.

While the Critical Area Criteria define minimum standards for local Critical Area programs, many local governments adopt modified provisions in order to accomplish specific objectives, such as providing more open space adjacent to sensitive habitats, collecting fees for Buffer impacts and spending these funds on appropriate restoration efforts, or developing a plan for a public boardwalk network to make shoreline areas accessible while minimizing adverse impacts. Public comment on these innovative provisions ensures that they are implemented effectively and contribute to the goals of Maryland's Critical Area Program.



- *Appropriate regulations are needed to ensure that accommodating future growth in Maryland does not result in degradation or destruction of Maryland's natural resources.*

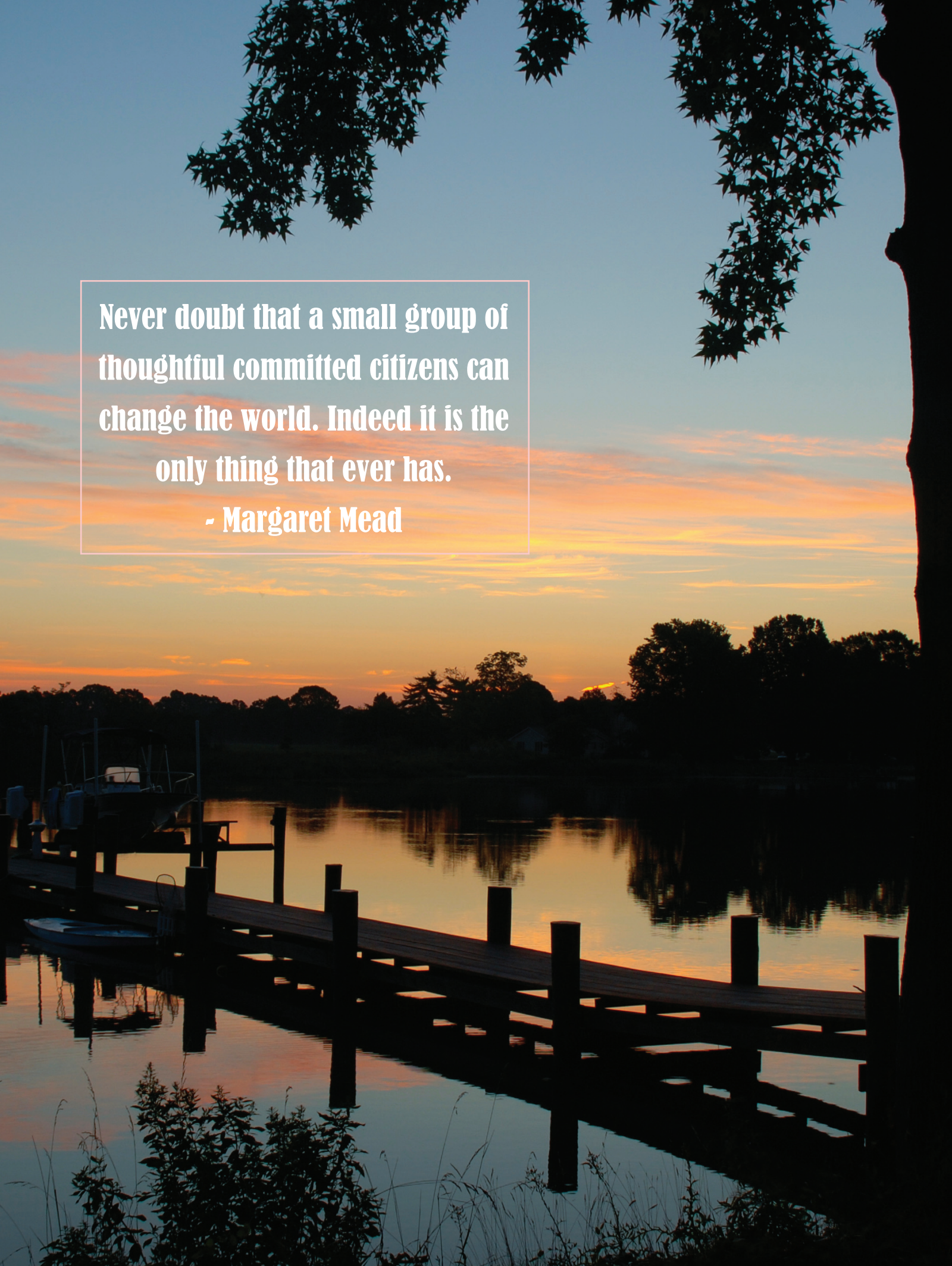
Using the Political Process

Citizens also positively affect Maryland's Critical Area Program by supporting and voting for local and State officials who strongly support the Program. Interested and involved constituents may actually shape political decisions concerning land use, water quality, and wildlife by contacting their local and State officials. Elected officials need to know that accommodating growth to maintain a healthy economy for the State should not be accomplished at the expense of Maryland's important natural resources.

Writing a letter or sending an e-mail to a county commissioner or State delegate is a helpful way for citizens to explain their views on the environment and any pending decisions or legislation. It is important that government officials understand why more needs to be done to protect the Bays. Concise, factual, and personalized correspondence that explains the effect of proposed legislation on an individual or a community sends a message to legislators that their actions relating to Maryland's Bays really do matter. If proposed legislation does not maximize opportunities

to protect and preserve Maryland's Bays, constituents' recommendations for alternative measures help lawmakers develop necessary amendments that are far more effective.

Voting for candidates who make Bay restoration efforts a priority is necessary to ensure that Maryland's Critical Area Program remains strong. It can be easy for a lawmaker to acknowledge that the health of the Bays is important. However, an elected official's voting record in support of important Critical Area Law changes is what demonstrates a real commitment to restoring Maryland's Bays. Recent modifications of the Critical Area Law improved its effectiveness by expanding the Critical Area to include the Atlantic Coastal Bays, clarifying where development activities can be intensified through the use of growth allocation, and increasing fines for violations. These legislative changes received strong support from the General Assembly. Continued support of future changes will be necessary in order for the Critical Area Program to remain responsive to ongoing development pressure.



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead