

SB229

Sarah Leshner (private individual)

Support FAV

SB 229

I support SB 229 granting all counties the right to control toll roads through their jurisdictions because localities including mine, Montgomery County, need to take back control that has been snatched from us by the state administrators. We need much more transparency and accountability from the State Highway Administration and managers for the proposed public-private partnership I-495/I-270 expanded highway toll lane project.

And we need to consider the economic costs of human and ecosystem and climate health that are not mentioned in the fiscal note for SB229.

During the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission Nov. 20, 2019, meeting on this project, Prince George's County Planning Board chair Elizabeth Hewlett and Montgomery County vice chair Casey Anderson repeated pushed the state highway officials for details on tolls, other financial issues, environmental impact, and failure to include transit options, but were stonewalled.

The frustrated commissioners told the state highway officials that their concerns weren't being heard, just as they hadn't been heard in an earlier June meeting. They refused to concur with the state highway plans until they got more facts.

I too feel my concerns aren't being heard by state administrators. According to the fiscal note for SB 229, approximately \$100 million taxpayer dollars have been budgeted to continue planning for the new lanes on I-495 and I-270. Taxpayer dollars are being used to collect data and model these roads, but taxpayers, and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, are being told we can't have access to the details.

The details, both fiscal and environmental, are essential for understanding and critiquing why the SHA has rejected many alternatives. And for assessing the fiscal soundness of contracts.

The Maryland Board of Public Works January 8 meeting discussion and decision said the public needs to share risks to get the best contractor bid.

Amanda Allen is leaving her position as the governor's director of intergovernmental affairs to become Maryland Government Affairs manager for Transurban, the private transportation firm that is seeking to partner with the state in this giant public-private partnership.

This suggests that instead of a level bidding field, Transurban has already been given a privileged place. But we, the taxpayers who have funded the studies behind this project, are told we can't learn the details. Secrecy shrouds everything. We need transparency for democracy to flourish.

The State Highway officials told the Park and Planning commissioners that they had to keep information secret because of the bidding process.

I feel that a secret bidding and contract process, especially as rushed as this one seems to be, with one bidder seemingly favored, puts me and other taxpayers at risk of fiscal and environmental disaster.

This is the largest public-private highway partnership ever proposed. Even much smaller projects have an unhappy history of failure leaving taxpayers stuck with enormous bills when tolls fail to adequately compensate the private contractors, or other difficulties arise.

In a 2019 hearing for a predecessor to SB229, former Transportation Secretary Pete Rahm said there was no need for such a bill since NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act, would require the SHA to engage with citizens along the road corridors.

But President Trump is seeking to drastically curtail and undercut NEPA, so it's very risky to trust that NEPA will be able to give localities any substantial control.

Most important, I feel Gov. Hogan and state highway administrators are pushing for highway expansion assuming transportation needs for the next 50 years can be predicated on patterns from the last 50. But we know that isn't going true.

Climate change, which Gov. Hogan says he accepts, has become a climate crisis. Australian bush fires have consumed an area larger than West Virginia. Antarctica is rapidly losing glaciers at a rate that will raise sea levels at least ten feet. Floods and storms are causing ever more damage. With its long ocean and bay coastlines, Maryland faces serious risks.

The Davos 2020 Economic Forum theme was "Stakeholders for a Cohesive and Sustainable World." Global elite business leaders said companies needed to engage all stakeholders, including public and private actors and the planet itself, by addressing the economic costs of climate change and ecosystem loss. Investment firm BlackRock CEO Larry Fink said "Climate change has become a defining factor in companies' long-term prospects."

But the Davos forum – and multiple international climate conferences, most recently Paris – have failed to fully embrace and implement a carbon tax, which is considered the most effective way of letting market forces find the best way to reduce carbon emissions. A carbon tax bill is being introduced in this legislative session.

If Gov. Hogan is really intent on making Maryland friendly for business he must consider the climate change costs of expanding highways. The proposed expansion of I-495 will replace trees and other carbon-absorbing plants and soil with pavement. This pavement will trap heat, further warming areas along the expanded highways. Rainfall patterns, already quite locally variable, will be affected. Flash floods will increase, polluting Rock Creek, the Anacostia, and the Chesapeake.



Gov. Hogan wants to sue Pennsylvania and the EPA for polluting the Chesapeake. Surely he should begin by addressing pollution from the expanded highways he is pushing for. His administration has claimed that congestion increases emissions – which it does – but they deliberately misinterpreted data showing that adding lanes and hence more traffic increases emissions even more.

Air, water, noise, and heat pollution will increase stress and degrade health for those like me living near the highways. Children in schools like Nix Elementary School in my neighborhood and right next to I-495 will suffer. When children – and adults suffer health effects, the county incurs additional costs in education and other services. These costs are not born by the private transportation developer, or addressed in the SB229 fiscal note, but they will be a burden on taxpayers like me in Montgomery County.

A new economics text spends a substantial space on analyzing the economic, social, and public policy issues that intersect in climate change. The authors show the difficulty of getting competing economic actors to give up business as usual and restrict climate altering carbon emissions, analogous to playing “chicken.” But unless all parties do curb their business-as-usual habits and restrict emissions, the planet and ecosystems on which all life depends will be destroyed.

The planet cannot sustain business as usual; it’s a dangerous fantasy to think we can all go on as we have without drastic alteration in our behavior. We’ve known this for decades, but in spite of repeated international climate forums, there’s been a danger lack of leadership towards resolving this.

At the Davos and many earlier forums 17-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg begged those of us in positions of power to act responsibly towards her and future generations.

Expanding I-495 and I-270 will only induce more traffic, encourage more sprawl, degrade local and global ecosystems, make the climate crisis worse.

I urge the passage of SB229 because we need to give counties and local governments more control over highway expansion projects. Projects that may benefit Gov. Hogan’s real estate holdings, but won’t serve the rest of us.

Gov. Hogan’s administration offered a late and inadequate approach to dealing with the climate catastrophe. Counties including Montgomery and cities including Takoma Park have pushed forward with their own plans for cutting greenhouse gases. But they must have control over transportation projects like highway expansion and transit alternatives if they are to begin to address emissions from that sector.

Change is scary for me as well as everyone else. If we continue business as usual and the changes that will occur as the planet continues to overheat are scarier.

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