

HB0019 - Education - School Construction - Pedestrian Safety Plans (Safe Walk to School Act)

From:

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Support: Recommend Favorable vote for HB0019

To the Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

The Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations supports HB 0019. This bill will help to prioritize traffic safety and could potentially prevent needless crashes involving students and their families near school buildings throughout the state.

Safe Routes To Schools program seeks to educate students about street safety, which is good, but educating vulnerable children isn't enough. But we need to think about all road users, children, grandmothers, people in wheelchairs, and cars, when we build and renovate our neighborhoods, and that includes school renovations. Engineering and construction planning can go a long way to preventing pedestrian dangers for all.

Every community has its local schools, and almost every neighborhood in our state county is abutted by at least one school building, especially in urban areas. The impact of traffic around those schools is tremendous. With each school holding as many 1400 children, there are literally hundreds of parents doing drop-off and pick up in our neighborhoods and hundreds of big yellow buses circling around daily.

We must address the gaps in safe pedestrian facilities near our schools including lack pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks, is just two blocks from a multi-lane road that lacks space for pedestrians and has few cross walks.

My own county provides many ready examples of why this bill is needed. As you may be aware, Montgomery County has added an additional 11,000 students in the last ten years. To meet the demand, lots of school buildings are slated for additions or renovations. There are also areas of our county where we've added new school buildings. A large portion of the work done on schools is happening in urban areas which were built more than seventy years ago.

Parents have found construction – while very welcome for the purposes of reducing crowding – is a frustrating process due to lack of attention to traffic safety needs. Retrofitting neighborhoods to meet modern school transportation is challenging. Most of us would like to see our kids walk and ride their bikes but find that the areas near schools are often too dangerous. In an age where we are trying hard to reduce the impact of climate change and get our kids to live more healthy lifestyles by exercising more, this just seems wrong. Kids should be able to walk safely if they live within the school's mandated walk radius. We are telling families they must walk, but not giving them safe ways to do so.

Currently, residents find that they are often not consulted when it comes to traffic impact of a new or renovated and expanded school, despite having decades of experience navigating their own local streets. Often, a large school building is squeezed into a small space by designers who have rarely visited a community in real life during rush hour. Builders and school boards want to maximize educational objectives, which is good. But pedestrian data needs to be gathered and taken seriously.

There is also strong evidence that it would be easier and cheaper to incorporate traffic safety measures into the planning process than it is to go in and retrofit after a school has already opened. You can't move a building once its complete. In some neighborhoods, parents have been able to form traffic safety groups and volunteer at pick up and drop off times to increase safety. But poverty isn't just

about lack of money, it is also lack of time. At many urban schools where traffic issues are most pressing, parents are working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Pedestrian safety often remains a large and often unaddressed need. It is not equitable to expect that all parents have the means to compensate for bad street design by taking time away from work or adjusting their work schedules and routines. It would be far more effective to build school buildings that function with pedestrian needs in mind from the start.

We can alleviate the burden of traffic safety from principals and parents by prioritizing pedestrian and bike safety during construction. The positive impact of thinking will be felt for decades to come.

I thank you for your time and consideration today.