

WRITTEN TESTIMONY - January 18, 2022

(HB 19), Education - The Safe Walk to School Act.

Testimony Delivered by: Kristy Daphnis, Montgomery County Resident, Local Parent Teacher Association Board Member, and Chair of the Montgomery County Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Traffic Safety Advisory Committee

Bill Position: Support

HB 19 is critical to providing students across the State of Maryland with options for safe pedestrian and bicycle routes to school. Currently, there is no requirement to plan for pedestrian infrastructure as a condition of State funding approval. The process of comprehensively considering pedestrian safety and infrastructure needs is often delayed, and the construction plans for schools are not adequate in their approach to integrating infrastructure that provides seamless routes for students who are within walking boundaries. This bill is important given our County and Statewide efforts to reduce roadway deaths to zero ("Vision Zero"). I urge you as lawmakers to help contribute to this goal, by putting in place laws that will enable safe transportation options for all of Montgomery County's 1m+ residents - particularly those who are most vulnerable to traffic injuries or death, including (and especially) school-aged children.

The Problem: When School Systems and Transportation agencies plan for roadway infrastructure around newly constructed or renovated schools, this planning often happens too late and in a manner that is out of synch with the jurisdiction's capital improvement projects. This can result in beautiful new school facilities with poor transportation and traffic flow throughout boundary areas; and, desperately lacking safe pedestrian and bicycle access.

To improve safety for our school-aged children, State-wide funding approval processes should include measures that require School systems and other agencies to collaborate with communities to fully assess the volume and impact on pedestrian and bicycle trips, and the associated infrastructure needs around new and significantly renovated schools. All students within walking boundaries of schools should be able to safely walk to school, especially if the school is new. A new school without a safe walking and biking route for students is a missed opportunity - especially if the lack of a safe route is due to poor planning and mismanagement.

HB 19 would provide for reasonable mitigation of the problem. The Bill would require School Systems to integrate pedestrian and bicycle safety planning early in the funding approval process for certain State-funded new school construction or significant renovations, and would require School systems to work with the community and other agencies to produce a comprehensive Pedestrian Safety Plan, including identification of infrastructure needs.

I am testifying in supports HB 19, because it would:

- Improve safety and pedestrian access for students at new or newly renovated schools across the State of Maryland, allowing the option for more students to walk or bike to school.
- Ensure community engagement on factors beyond the strict “4-walls” definition of the school facility itself. The pedestrian facilities and streets on and around school property provide important connections across the community, supporting and embracing the “Complete Neighborhood” concept, allowing walkability to key institutions and services (e.g., schools).
- Improve cross-jurisdictional coordination, including holistic planning and integration of capacity and infrastructure needs on both State and local roadways within school zones.
- Encourage improved stewardship of taxpayer dollars, by requiring thoughtful assessment of nearby infrastructure. The actions identified during this early planning and approval process would ensure that capital improvement projects are accounted for (and then executed) in the most efficient manner.

Thank you for your time and attention to this Bill. I urge you to consider supporting HB 19, to help improve safety for children and communities around all State-funded new and newly renovated schools across the State of Maryland.