Senate Bill 724

Motor Vehicles – School Buses – Seat Belts

MACo Position: **OPPOSE**

To: Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: February 22, 2024

From: Brianna January

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **OPPOSES** SB 724. SB 724 requires every school bus purchased after October 1, 2024, to have seat belts, and every school bus purchased prior to that date to be retrofitted with seat belts by October 1, 2026. **While counties appreciate the safety concerns raised by the bill, complying with its requirements would pose a significant financial and labor challenge for county governments.**

School systems own and operate thousands of school buses and contract with thousands more to transport Maryland's students. On average, outfitting school buses with seat belts costs more than $10,000 per bus. With no state support offered in the bill, county governments would be on the hook for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars of procurement and labor to install seat belts. Also concerning is the very quick timeline proposed in the bill, essentially allowing counties only one budget cycle to prepare for and fund this costly, unfunded mandate.

Counties also have concerns about the challenges SB 724 poses to the already strained school bus workforce. The bill prohibits any students from standing on the bus and prohibits buses from moving while students are standing. To enforce this to the wording of the bill, school buses could conceivably require additional in-vehicle staff at a time when school systems across the country are struggling to hire and retain school bus drivers, even at premium contracted rates.

Maryland's counties are facing an unprecedented wave of fiscal effects. Revenues are softening – and are even in decline – as federal support recedes from the national economy and high-interest rates slow real estate sales. Costs of workforce, construction, and legal liability are all mounting dramatically. Additionally, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future poses costs for education that, for each county, will absorb or exceed their projected new revenues from current sources.

Furthermore, county options for generating meaningful revenues are limited, with most counties already at the state's income tax rate cap, leaving the regressive property tax as the principal remaining alternative. Placing new operational or fiscal burdens on county governments in this precarious setting is untenable and unrealistic.

For these reasons, MACo **OPPOSES** SB 724 and urges an **UNFAVORABLE** report.