

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 158
(Senator Ellis)

Education, Energy, and the Environment

Counties - Construction of Sidewalks and Crosswalks - Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools

This bill requires each local school board to annually prepare a report on safe alternative routes to public schools. A “safe alternative route” includes (1) a road with sidewalks and, at intersections, crosswalks; (2) a foot path; and (3) a bike path. The county governing body must annually review the report and construct any sidewalks and crosswalks necessary to create safe alternative routes for students as identified in the report. If the county governing body must alter a road that is not subject to the jurisdiction of the county in order to meet the bill’s requirements, the governing body must develop a plan with the governmental entity or person that has control of the road and make reasonable efforts to execute the plan in an expeditious manner. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill is not anticipated to materially affect State finances or operations.

Local Effect: Local school system and county government expenditures increase, likely significantly, in order to implement the bill’s requirements, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected. **The bill imposes a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Bill Summary: The bill requires local school boards to annually prepare a report that identifies:

- for each public school in the county, those areas of the county where a student who is regularly assigned to the school would be ineligible for transportation services

- based on the distance between a residence and the school; and
- pathways those students may use to travel between his or her residence and regularly assigned school using only a safe alternative route (or a contiguous series of safe alternative routes).

The local school board must post to the county's website each report prepared pursuant to the bill.

Current Law: At its own expense, a county governing body may provide transportation for public school students (in addition to the transportation provided by the State).

Local Expenditures: The bill increases local expenditures by a significant amount each year due to the requirements that (1) local school systems prepare an annual report on safe alternative routes to public schools and (2) county governments initiate capital improvement projects for additional sidewalks and crosswalks.

Local School System Reporting Requirement

Multiple local school systems, including Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Frederick, Montgomery, Prince George's, and Wicomico counties, advise that production of an annual report on safe alternative routes to all public schools in the county entails meaningful additional expenditures. Assuming the annual report requires the evaluation of all schools in a district, local school systems advise that they face meaningful expenditures to either hire staff with sufficient engineering expertise to conduct the surveys or contract with firms to perform surveys of local schools.

Exact costs depend on the structure of personnel performing the survey and the size of the district, but Anne Arundel County Public Schools estimates staffing and equipment costs for physical surveys of the county's over 125 individual school zones may total as much as \$670,000 in fiscal 2027, including about \$452,100 for additional personnel with appropriate expertise; Baltimore City Public Schools estimates at least \$200,000 in annual expenditures to hire additional staff to perform the analysis; Montgomery County Public Schools advises that contracting for an analysis of all schools in the district could cost as much as \$600,000 annually; Prince George's County Public Schools estimates that contracting for the completion of surveys could cost \$400,000 annually; and Wicomico County expects to contract for completion of the study at an estimated cost of \$200,000. Similarly, Baltimore County advises that its school system may need one additional staff person to oversee preparation of the report annually.

County Government Infrastructure Requirement

In the event that a local school board identifies areas without safe alternative routes for students, county governments could meet the bill's requirements in several ways, including (1) constructing new sidewalks and crosswalks, as identified in the study; (2) increasing

funding for local school boards to provide bus transportation to all students (regardless of distance from the school); or (3) adjusting existing school boundaries in order to ensure no students reside in areas without safe alternative routes to school.

The Department of Legislative Services (DLS) advises that, given the number of schools in the State and the unique transportation system characteristics of each county, it is not possible to provide an exact fiscal estimate for each county. However, the following examples highlight the potential costs associated with the bill.

Anne Arundel County

Anne Arundel County Public Schools anticipates that the county may face substantial costs under the bill due to right-of-way purchases, condemnations, design, construction, and maintenance fees in order to remedy findings from physical surveys.

Harford County

Harford County Public Schools estimates a cost of \$4.5 million for engineering, project management, inspection, and side walk construction alone. The county advises there may be additional significant costs associated with right-of-way acquisition, utility impacts, and other unanticipated issues associated with sidewalk construction on a scale required by the bill.

Montgomery County

In response to a request for information on similar prior legislation, Montgomery County advised that it expects significant additional costs under the bill beginning in the first year of implementation, fiscal 2027 for this legislation, (see **Exhibit 1**) as hundreds of miles of linear sidewalk and accompanying Americans with Disabilities Act compliant ramps and crosswalks would need to be built in neighborhoods that may have various complicating factors (e.g., topographic, right-of-way, and other environmental impact issues).

The county noted that the bulk of costs resulting from the bill are likely incurred within the first year of implementation, with much smaller amounts needed for construction and maintenance in the out-years. In the first year of implementation, fiscal 2027 for this bill, the county anticipated additional expenditures totaling about \$96.5 million. In later years, ongoing costs vary but total about \$950,000 by fiscal 2031.

The fiscal 2027 figure includes sidewalk installation (on one side of the street) based on prior contract prices per linear foot of residential sidewalk (and existing maps of sidewalk gaps within school walk zones) as well as costs related to right-of-way acquisition, utility impacts, tree impacts, and slope issues. The estimate also includes two additional county

positions (one design engineer and one construction inspector) to assist with managing and monitoring the new construction projects.

Exhibit 1
Anticipated Expenditures for Montgomery County under the Bill
Fiscal 2027

Positions (Salaries and Wages)	\$206,393
Contractual Services	93,423,000
Fixed Charges	2,832,500
Total Initial Expenditures	\$96,461,893

Source: Montgomery County; Department of Legislative Services

St. Mary's County

St. Mary's County Department of Public Works and Transportation expects \$7.8 million in additional expenditures in fiscal 2027 for construction of new sidewalks in accordance with any reports made by the county board of education. The county notes that in rural areas, establishing safe alternative routes may require constructing sidewalks on terrain with significant topographic challenges. Additionally, the county expects significant potential difficulty constructing sidewalks on roads that may not be under the jurisdiction of the county. Finally, the county expects significant expense in the out-years for the maintenance, repair and regular snow removal on the newly constructed sidewalks.

Boundary Adjustments

While no school systems reported plans to adjust school boundaries as a result of the bill, DLS advises that school systems may be able to meet the bill's requirements by modifying boundaries. For instance, there may be areas in certain school districts with access to safe alternative routes that are also served by school buses. The school buses that serve those areas could potentially be repurposed in order to serve students who currently reside in areas that are not eligible for school bus transportation services and are not served by safe alternative routes. However, any boundary adjustments may require considerable planning and administrative time for school boards.

Additional Comments: The Maryland Department of Transportation maintains a [statewide 20-year Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan](#). Related to pedestrian and bicycle safety around schools, the plan discusses the Safe Routes to Schools Programs. The program is a federally funded reimbursement program administered by the State Highway

Administration (SHA). Eligible sponsors can apply for funding to support infrastructure and noninfrastructure activities that enable and encourage children to safely walk, bicycle, or roller skate to school. Federal funds allocated to the program must be used to benefit elementary and middle school children and are required to have a 20% cash match contribution from the State.

School zones and the additional traffic safety rules that accompany them are the primary safety mechanism for students who walk or bike to school. SHA or a local transportation authority is authorized to establish a school zone and maximum speed limits within the school zone, within a half-mile radius of any school. In any established school zone, SHA or the local authority must place signs that designate the school zone and may place other traffic control devices, such as timed flashing warning lights or traffic signals. The signs must show the maximum speed limit of the school zone, and standard fines may be doubled if a speed violation occurs when any timed flashing lights are activated. Many school districts also employ crossing guards and establish speed monitoring systems to ensure the safety of students and others on and around the school grounds.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See HB 811 and SB 526 of 2025, SB 200 of 2024, and SB 95 of 2023.

Designated Cross File: HB 394 (Delegate Terrasa, *et al.*) - Government, Labor, and Elections and Ways and Means.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Maryland Department of Transportation; Maryland Association of Counties; Baltimore, Charles, Frederick, Harford, and Montgomery counties; Anne Arundel County Public Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools; Baltimore County Public Schools; Frederick County Public Schools; Harford County Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Prince George's County Public Schools; St. Mary's County Public Schools; Wicomico County Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

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sj/hlb

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