

HB 615, Education - School Construction - Pedestrian Safety Plans

Testimony from:

Alison Gillespie, Chair of the Safe Routes to School Committee, Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations

Position: Support

I am writing in support of this bill.

As Chair of the MCCPTA's Safe Routes to School Committee and the parent of two teenagers, I have become keenly aware of the need for increased pedestrian safety measures around schools.

Some people are working on educating students about navigating streets safely, which is good. Many kids in Maryland are taught about cross walks and distracted driving and asked to not wear ear buds or text while crossing a street.

But we are finding that education alone is not enough to protect our students. This year we have had one child killed in a tragic crash on the way home from school and several others hit and severely injured. We, as parents, have come to see a need to address how our streets are built and designed. We need to think about kids, not just cars, when we build and renovate our neighborhoods.

Every community has its local schools, and almost every neighborhood in my county is abutted by at least one school building. The impact of traffic around those schools is tremendous. With each school holding about 700 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.

Many of our neighborhoods were engineered to favor high-speed driving and lack pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks. My own kids' high school, which has a very large number of students receiving free and reduced meals, is just two blocks from a multi-lane road that lacks space for pedestrians and has few cross walks.

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. There's something really wrong with that. 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.

HB 615 would help to prioritize traffic safety by forcing construction companies to address pedestrian and bike needs during the planning process.

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.

In my own neighborhood, for example, parents voiced tremendous concerns about the impact that traffic would have on local streets when Flora M. Singer Elementary was renovated about a decade ago. Concerns regarding pedestrian routes were ignored. Less than a year after opening, the school administration was facing major challenges such as blind spots for buses, lack of turn around areas for cars, narrow streets and hidden entrances that had long been used by children who were on their way to the neighborhood's parks. Trying to solve these problems made the principal's job more difficult over the last ten years. Principals learn a lot when they are being trained, but we can't expect them to be traffic experts as well as great educators.

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.

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 about pedestrians during construction will be felt for decades to come.

Linking Interagency for School Construction funds to this measure is a good idea, because it will force construction experts to work more closely with local communities and think of the people moving to and from and around schools every day. This will make schools part of a safety solution, instead of making them into a source of traffic trouble.

I thank you for your time and consideration today.

Alison Gillespie

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