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Committee: Judicial Proceedings
Testimony on: HB 404 – “Vehicle Laws – Speed Limits – Establishment”
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: March 24, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of Sierra Club supports HB 404 as amended, which would authorize local authorities statewide to decrease the maximum speed limit to a reasonable and safe level on highways if engineering and traffic investigation justify such a decrease. Currently the lowest speed limit allowed on many highways is 25 miles per hour except in school zones during school hours.

We live in a car-centric culture where transportation planning, road infrastructure and vehicle laws are largely focused on enabling vehicles to get to their destination as swiftly as possible. Unfortunately, this has resulted in some drivers feeling they have priority on the road, and there are high rates of injury and death for pedestrians and bicyclists as well as vehicle drivers and passengers. Research shows that a vehicle’s rate of speed has a direct impact on the ability to see ahead and notice people in or near the roadway, how quickly one can respond to avoid potential problems, how long it takes to stop a vehicle, and how likely someone will die or be seriously injured as a result of a collision.

Transportation is now the primary contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in our state. Tailpipe emissions from cars and trucks are also a major source of health-damaging air pollution. For these reasons, there is an urgent need to get individuals out of their cars and taking public transit, riding bikes, and walking more. However, these activities are not as safe as they should be when vehicles are travelling too fast in densely populated areas, in shopping districts, where roads are narrow, or where there is not a clear line of vision.

Lowering speed limits is a key component of “Vision Zero,” a program the state and many localities have adopted to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries for all road users. Other components of Vision Zero include having adequate sidewalks, bikeways and crosswalks, allowing sufficient time to cross streets, narrowing lanes, and adding other traffic calming measures. However, even if most of the elements of Vision Zero just mentioned are implemented, it is doubtful that the program can succeed unless the speed limit can be lowered where appropriate, as this bill would allow.

In summary, this bill as amended makes sense for our residents and our environment. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 404.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.