



**Testimony to the House Environment and Transportation Committee
HB 656 – Safe Access for All (SAFE) Roads Act of 2022 –
Position: Favorable**

March 14, 2022

The Honorable Kumar Barve
Environment and Transportation Committee
Room 251, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401
cc: Members, Environment and Transportation Committee

Honorable Chair Barve and Members of the Committee:

I'm a consumer advocate and Executive Director of Consumer Auto, a non-profit group that works to foster safety, transparency, and fair treatment for Maryland drivers and car buyers.

We support **HB 656** because it will improve the safety of all Maryland road users – and especially of the highly vulnerable pedestrians and cyclists who account for more than 20% of the fatalities on Maryland's roads.

Over the course of the pandemic, we've seen a drastic rise in deaths on U.S. roads. In 2020, overall U.S. road deaths increased 7.2% to more than 38,000 – and 6,721 pedestrians were among those killed (up 4.8% from the previous year).¹ And because that rise came despite a significant drop in traffic volume, on a miles per driven bases pedestrian deaths rose a startling 21% in 2020.² Complete figures aren't yet available for 2021 but early data shows road deaths went up another 12% over the first nine months of last year.³

Sadly, those figures only intensify trends that have been clear for many years. While roads in other wealthy nations have gotten much safer in recent decades, fatalities have been trending upward on U.S. roads for several decades. For pedestrians, total fatalities rose about 45% between 2010 (4,302 deaths) and 2019 (6,237 deaths).⁴ In Maryland we haven't seen quite so dramatic a spike in fatalities but between 125 and 138 pedestrians died in our state each year 2019-2021.⁵

Not surprisingly, those deaths are not evenly distributed. People walking in lower-income neighborhoods are more likely to be killed, with those in the lowest-income neighborhoods almost twice as likely to die as those in middle-income Census tracts.⁶ Death rates are also unusually high among older Americans and among African-Americans and Native Americans.⁷

1 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-27/usdot-s-buttiieg-announces-new-traffic-safety-strategy>

2 <https://www.ghsa.org/resources/news-releases/GHSA/Ped-Spotlight-Addendum21>

3 <https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/traffic-fatalities-estimates-jan-sept-2021>

4 <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

5 <https://zerodeathsmd.gov/resources/crashdata/#>

6 <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

7 Ibid.



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While many factors help make our roads dangerous, safety advocates and safety regulators now focus on the systems of road and vehicle design as the core of the problem – and on changing the way they operate the key to making our streets safer. U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced such a national strategy in January⁸ and the state of Maryland and some of our counties have also moved in that direction.

HB 656 would take important steps to advance that strategy and make it work more effectively to protect our most vulnerable road users. It would require the State Highway Administration (SHA) to analyze the dangers at intersections and street corridors where bicyclists and pedestrians have died, to review the factors that endanger them, to determine what gaps in our infrastructure put people at risk and to recommend engineering improvements to improve safety. Crucially, the bill requires much more than studies; it also mandates millions in annual funding for five years (Fiscal Years 2024-28) to improve bicycle and sidewalk safety, retrofit streets to be more ADA compliant, re-engineer dangerous areas, and re-design traffic management systems.

That kind of funding ought to make a real difference in the safety of our most vulnerable road users. And while some drivers may complain about those changes, re-engineering dangerous intersections and corridors with an eye to protecting their most vulnerable users will in the end tend to lower speeds and alter road designs in ways that will make drivers significantly safer as well.

We support HB 656 and ask you to give it a FAVORABLE report.

Sincerely,

Franz Schneiderman
Consumer Auto

⁸ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-27/usdot-s-buttigieg-announces-new-traffic-safety-strategy>