

Bill: Senate Bill 0095

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

Position: **Favorable with Amendments**



Members of the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee,

Strong Towns Baltimore is a volunteer group seeking to strengthen our community via reforms that result in more productive, connected, walkable, sustainable, lovable places. As a result, we can not help but be favorably disposed to legislation that improves safety and pedestrian access for our communities' families and schools. Safe pedestrian networks connecting our homes to neighborhood destinations are a critical link in establishing community and should be an expectation for all Marylanders, but we agree that priority should be placed first on children who are not provided transportation to their public school. This is especially important as pedestrian fatalities make up the majority of school-transportation-related fatalities in the United States [1].

In addition to protecting children and their families commuting to and from school, safe pedestrian or bike routes help our children establish habits of healthy, active transportation. Furthermore, all Maryland residents benefit from additional safe pedestrian infrastructure as pedestrians account for over 20% of all roadway fatalities in our state [2].

However, we feel that this bill requires amendments on several points:

1. While the bill calls for a report on Safe Alternative Routes and does a good job defining safe routes, it addresses only their existence, not the extent to which they are usable. **We recommend including standards for accessibility and state of repair to the definition of Safe Alternative Routes.** Sidewalks with high curbs or asphalt paths marred by root heave are a barrier to disabled students and caregivers.
2. While we applaud the requirement to provide safe pedestrian infrastructure, it is easy to be in favor of something when disconnected from cost. **We recommend that this bill be coupled with funding mechanisms, including stable and sufficient funds for the maintenance of existing and newly-built Safe Alternative Routes to schools.** We must apply sustainable planning to our local capital budgets as well as our transportation needs.
3. Providing Safe Alternative Routes is a safety intervention, but like all safety interventions, the Safe Alternative Routes must not be inconvenient to use. **We recommend that the definition of a Safe Alternative Route include a limit on**

deviations from the shortest route to schools. If the direct route is 0.5 miles with a 200 yard gap along a busy arterial road while the Safe Alternative Route is 1.0 miles, has the intent of this bill been met? Many factors weigh into pedestrian decisions: safety of route, schedule constraints, weight of load, and weather conditions are just some of the factors. Imagine a middle school student who has overslept carrying a full backpack on a chilly winter morning, which route will they choose? Can school-age children accurately weigh the risk of a shorter route against a safer route?

4. Finally, while safety must be a high priority and safe routes to school should be implemented or improved as soon as possible, **we believe the specified single year to achieve compliance should be modified to a phased-in approach.** Quality sidewalks and paths can not be wished into existence overnight; they require community input, design, quality construction and jurisdictional oversight. In the bill's current form, some or all of these concerns would have to be compromised and we would end up with poorer pedestrian infrastructure than under a measured implementation schedule.

While we have highlighted several concerns and changes we recommend to this bill, we thank Senator Ellis for prioritizing this issue and the safety of our most vulnerable pedestrians. We encourage the committee to carefully consider this bill and improvements suggested through this hearing.

Thanks you for your consideration of our testimony,
Henry Cook
Timonium, Maryland
Member, Strong Towns Baltimore (<https://strongtownsbaltimore.com/>)

Co-signed,
Michael Scepaniak, Cockeysville
Joshua Spokes, Baltimore City
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Josh Poland, Baltimore City
Shaun Lehmann, Ellicott City
James Pizzurro, Towson
John Locke, Catonsville
Troy Gharibani,, Timonium

References:

- [1] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) National Center for Statistics and Analysis "Traffic Safety Stats - School-Transportation-Related Crashes - 2011-2020 Data" DOT HS 813327, Figure 1, June 2022, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813327>
- [2] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) National Center for Statistics and Analysis "Traffic Safety Stats - Pedestrians - 2020 Data" DOT HS 813310, Table 7, May 2022, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/Publication/813310>