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P.O. Box 606 | Lisbon, Maryland 21797
www.mdhorsecouncil.org

One Common Bond: The Horse
One Common Voice: The Horse Council

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on HB 511

Vehicle Laws – Bicycles – Operation at Intersections

Environment and Transportation Committee – Feb. 15, 2024

UNFAVORABLE

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based trade association that represents the state-wide horse industry in Maryland. Our members include horse farms; horse related businesses; equestrian competitors; trainers; individual enthusiasts; equine-assisted therapy programs; and breed, interest, and discipline associations. We represent over 30,000 Marylanders who make their living with horses, or who just own and love them. We are a \$2.9 billion industry.¹

We oppose HB 511 on vagueness grounds, on public safety grounds, and on the grounds that there is no policy imperative – no reason -- to exempt bicyclists from Maryland’s traffic laws.

This bill would, if passed, apply to highways with two or fewer lanes, such as rural roads, which are the roads that we drive horse trailers on every day. Marylanders who are driving horse trailers need everyone else on the road to follow the traffic rules because the consequences of traffic accidents involving large animals can be fatal to drivers, passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists, and the animals they are hauling.

According to the Maryland Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (2019), highway engineers can consider a stop sign, yield sign, or no sign at all, if the general principles of yielding to a car with the right-of-way are sufficient to protect the public. When the general

¹ See American Horse Council Economic Impact Study for Maryland (2024), available at mdhorsecouncil.org/educational-resources/.



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principles of yielding to a car with the right-of-way are not sufficient to protect the public, however, stop signs or yield signs “should be used.” Section 2B.04.03. The decision about which sign to use, if any, is left to the safety engineer.

This bill would, if passed, override that safety engineers’ professional judgement about whether yielding to the right-of-way is sufficient to protect the public. This bill would allow bicyclists – but only bicycles -- to roll through stop signs and revert to the general principles of yielding to the right of way despite the fact that a safety engineer has already determined that the general principles of yielding to right-of-way are not safe.

Moreover, this bill would, if passed, override the safety engineers’ judgement for no discernible purpose. In what situation would it be safe enough for a bicycle to roll a stop sign but not safe enough for a passenger car or livestock trailer to do the same?

In addition, this bill, if passed, would give little guidance to anyone approaching the intersection as to which rules would apply in any specific situation – it says bicycles are exempt from the traffic laws if they are going at a “reasonable rate of speed,” unless a vehicle is “near enough” to the intersection to pose immediate danger.

There is no definition of “reasonable rate of speed” for a bicyclist. Is it the posted speed limit? Is it lower than the posted speed limit and if so, by how much? Is a motorist expected to make this geometric calculation while approaching an intersection? What metrics would a motorist use? How far away from the intersection must a driver be when she decides whether the traffic laws that apply to her also apply to the bicyclist? How near to the intersection does a car need to be to assume that the bicycle is going to stop at the stop sign? How would a driver even know that a bicyclist might be exempt from the traffic laws?

There is also no definition of “near enough,” and in our experience, a bicyclist is unlikely to judge accurately how near is “near enough” for a livestock trailer. Horse trailers traveling within posted speed limits carry more forward momentum than the average motor vehicle because of the weight of the horses – the more horses, the more momentum. This means that horse trailers cannot brake, accelerate, or change lanes as quickly as a passenger car. It is often the



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case that other drivers do not appreciate that carrying live weight requires a longer stopping distance than the average car, so trailer drivers often compensate for that by leaving even more distance between them and the traffic in front of them. Car drivers and bicyclists can misinterpret that extra stopping space and assume that the distance is safer than it is. In reality, a longer stopping distance does not convert “near enough” to “safe enough” for people hauling livestock.

The risk in a livestock trailer collision is not just to the driver. Horses who are thrown forward in a trailer risk serious injury or death to themselves and the driver, and extracting horses from a wrecked trailer is a difficult, time-consuming operation. In addition, a frightened horse can get loose and create further havoc on the road.

These concerns are not hypothetical. In June 2023, a car collided with a horse trailer in Cecil County, killing a 19-year-old woman and injuring another person. A similar accident occurred in Harford County in 2013 between a pick-up truck, a horse trailer, and a fuel delivery truck. One person died and the horses had to be sedated and taken to an emergency care clinic. In April 2018, a horse died in Caroline County when a Virginia State Trooper collided with the trailer. Two horses were killed in a July 2016 wreck in Maryland after a car cut-off the truck pulling the trailer. And in 2015, a man, his dog, and three horses died in Ohio when a passenger swerved abruptly and slowed suddenly in front of the trailer.

MHC urges an unfavorable report on HB 511.

Respectfully submitted,

THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL

(844) MDHORSE (844-634-6773)

Info@mdhorsecouncil.org