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Committee: Judicial Proceedings
Testimony on: SB 826, Vehicle Laws - Bicycles - Operation at Intersections
Position: Support
Hearing Date: February 28, 2024

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports SB826, which would legalize the "Idaho stop" for bicyclists in Maryland. This would allow a bicyclist approaching a stop sign at certain places to cautiously make a turn or proceed through the intersection without stopping if the cyclist reduces speed at a reasonable rate and yields the right-of-way to certain vehicles.

The "Idaho stop" is currently legal in 11 states and the District of Columbia, and is endorsed by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration as a method to increase bicycle ridership and safety. SB 826 has the potential to encourage alternative modes of transportation that do not produce greenhouse gas emissions, improve the health of individuals and communities, and promote racial equity. Additionally, the "Idaho stop" facilitates cycling as it is more of an issue for cyclists to restart from a stop than a motorized vehicle. The energy needed to stop and start every block at stop signs is a real impediment to mode shift away from motorized vehicles. It is also an issue for those with physical challenges to stop and start repeatedly.

While legalizing the "Idaho stop" will not improve the safety for bicyclists as much as dedicated infrastructure will, it is a great step in accepting the physical differences that exist between a motor vehicle and a bicycle, and recognizing that special considerations should be made to different forms of transport. Similar bills passed in other states have been shown to increase the number of bicyclists on the road, as they legalize a common riding behavior, reducing the risk of police harassment, which is especially important for riders of color and riders in urban areas, who are sometimes subject to pretextual stops.

Given that nearly a quarter of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions are produced by passenger cars, promoting alternative modes of transportation should be a high priority when it comes to preventing climate change. Bicycling is an especially promising mode of transportation because it has the potential to replace a great deal of car trips. Over half of all trips made in the U.S. in 2021 were under three miles, an easy biking distance for most. Bicycling also produces social and financial benefits by fostering social cohesion and civic participation, as well as lowering healthcare costs associated with sedentary diseases. In addition, nearly half of Americans reported wishing to be able to ride their bikes more often, with the main reason stated that is preventing this from happening is concerns over their safety.

For these reasons, the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on SB 826. In addition, we encourage the Committee to consider expanding the bill to allow bicyclists to treat red lights as stop signs (and to proceed after a stop and yielding to other traffic), a practice that is legal in five states, and would further increase ridership and rider safety.

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.

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