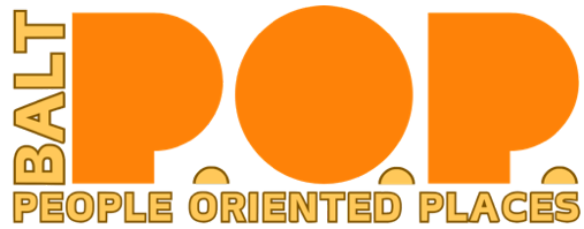


Bill: SB0526

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,

As a group that advocates for walkable, people-oriented, appealing communities throughout the Baltimore region, we support SB0526.

Fewer and fewer children are walking to school these days. In 1969, 89% of students in grades K through eight who lived within one mile of school traveled there either on-foot or by bicycle. By 2009, that number had plummeted to 35%. [1] Part of the reason is that more and more schools are located further than a mile away from their students' homes. This is driven by a desire to build schools on cheaper available land and our full embrace of low-density, automobile-centric development.

But, there still remain students within walking distance and parents who see the benefits in them walking. This bill will enable us to take some real steps to allow and encourage it. That said, we'd like to see four changes made to the bill.

The bill's definition of a "safe alternative route" specifies, in part, a road with sidewalks. We'd like to see this clarified based on the type of road and quality of the sidewalk. While a parent may be willing to allow their 1st grader to walk on a buffered sidewalk lined with street trees along a 25 mph residential street, they may not be willing to allow it on an unbuffered, fully-exposed sidewalk along a 45 mph arterial road. Some context-based criteria are needed here. Also, the sidewalks should be specified to be ADA-compliant, thereby allowing students of all abilities to use the specified route.

The bill calls for the county to identify safe alternative routes for those students who would be ineligible for transportation services based on the distance between their home and the school. This should be clarified to state that **no safe alternative route can be longer than the calculated distance** which has caused the student to be classified as being ineligible for transportation services. If a student lives across the road from their school, but that road is a 6-lane 45 mph divided arterial with slip lanes, the safe alternative route identified for them cannot be a 1 1/2 mile (transportation services qualifying) circuitous route around that arterial.

The bill calls for the county to construct any sidewalks and crosswalks necessary to create safe alternative routes for students as identified in the mandated report. While we would like to see

these routes created immediately, we concede that funding limits and community input will make such quick action infeasible. As such, we would like to see an expected schedule of progress spelled out. Requiring each county to make the necessary changes to provide an additional 10% of the applicable student population with a safe alternative route (such that all counties reach 100% completion within 10 years) seems like a good balance. After all, we're talking about the construction of relatively low-cost active transportation infrastructure, not new roads.

The bill does not call for any consequences should a county fail to comply with the mandate to provide the safe alternative routes called for. We suggest that any county that lags or misses the expected schedule of progress must be required to provide transportation services to those students who have not been provided a safe alternative route (or some other consequence).

In summary, we thoroughly endorse the motivations behind this bill, but would like to see it strengthened in four ways:

1. Add more detail to what "a road with sidewalks" means.
2. Make any identified safe alternative routes a walkable distance for each applicable student.
3. Specify an expected schedule of progress in constructing any identified safe alternative routes.
4. Specify consequences for a county failing to provide their safe alternative routes.

We hope the committee finds these points helpful and convincing and we urge its members to **vote in favor of SB0526, with our suggested amendments**. Thank you for your efforts and the opportunity for us to testify on this legislation.

[BaltPOP - Baltimoreans for People-Oriented Places](#)

References:

[1] The National Center for Safe Routes to School. "Walking to School: Trends, Issues and Evidence". As of February 8, 2025.

<https://www.walkbiketoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Trends-and-Research.pdf>