

SB526 - Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools

Uploaded by: Joseph Jakuta

Position: FAV

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Testimony on: SB 526 - "Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools"
Organization: Climate Parents of Prince George's
Person Submitting: Joseph Jakuta, Lead Volunteer
Position: Favorable, with Amendment
Hearing Date: February 12, 2025



Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for considering our testimony to SB 526, "Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools." Climate Parents is a campaign to reduce climate change-causing pollution in our schools, and our group is active in Prince George's County. In particular, we worked directly with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) technical staff and other advocates to develop a first-in-the-nation School Climate Change Action Plan.

In our work developing a Climate Change Action Plan for PGCPS, one of the main solutions to reducing vehicle emissions was to encourage more walking and biking to school. This is particularly important for students that live within the non-transportation areas, which are defined as being within 1½ mile for elementary school students and 2 miles for middle and high school students in Prince George's County.¹ However, one of the barriers to walking and biking to school is feeling unsafe, which is largely due to dangerous driving. When students and their parents do not feel it is safe to get to school by other means, they drive independently, which results in more localized air pollution at the entrance of schools, more wasted time for parents, and more chances for vehicles-on-pedestrian collisions at schools.

In Prince George's County, we know firsthand the tragedy that comes when students walking to school are not kept safe. In November 2023, two of our students were killed in a crosswalk by a driver as they walked to school. While this particular legislation will likely not have prevented that specific tragedy, there are numerous close calls every day on the roads that would be affected by this legislation.

We are supportive of this approach of requiring annual examinations of safe routes to schools and to require counties to implement missing sidewalks necessary to create safe routes to schools. This will be a positive step towards making walking to school safer for students. Given modern Geographic Information System (GIS) software these types of maps should be quite reasonable to produce efficiently at a low cost.

We do think it would be wise for the State Board of Education to have a role in ensuring that the plans are completed as expected and meet the legal requirements.

We do applaud that this legislation has been brought forward. We cannot live sustainably if our students cannot access their places of learning by safely walking or biking there. Each student that does not have access to LEA provided transportation should be able to get to school safely. We need a stronger version of this bill to put Maryland on the path towards that reality.

We encourage a **FAVORABLE** report for this important legislation.

SB526 - Counties -construction of Sidewalks and Cr

Uploaded by: Dawana Sterrette

Position: FWA

**Testimony of the
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners
Support with Amendments Senate Bill 526
Counties – Construction of Sidewalks and Crosswalks –
Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools.**

February 12, 2025

The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners supports any action that will allow safe routes to school. However, it is imperative that the General Assembly include funding to allow for additional funding, outside of the current capital improvement plan for the construction of sidewalks. As written, this legislation would present an adverse fiscal impact on the district. The impact is largely related to staffing.

As drafted, the bill would require the district to create a report that identifies: (I) areas of the county where a student would be ineligible for transportation based on distance and (II) pathways that a student may use to travel using only a safe alternative route(s).

Significant staff time would be required in order to create and complete the report and its three phases:

(1) create a GIS map identifying the areas where students would be ineligible for transportation based upon distance requirements, (2) complete an in-person survey of the areas that surround each public school (160+) within the district to identify and document safe, alternative routes between home and school within the boundaries identified on the GIS map, and (3) detail these safe routes within the final report to be posted on the district website.

City Schools believes approximately 20-30 hours of staff time per school would be required in order to meet these requirements and produce a comprehensive report. In addition, we expect most of these staff would have to be hired as our current staff are not likely to have the bandwidth to support an analysis of this magnitude while still maintaining current duties.

For the foregoing reasons, the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners supports with amendments Senate Bill 526.

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MGA 2025 Testimony Bill SB0526 (Safe Alternative R

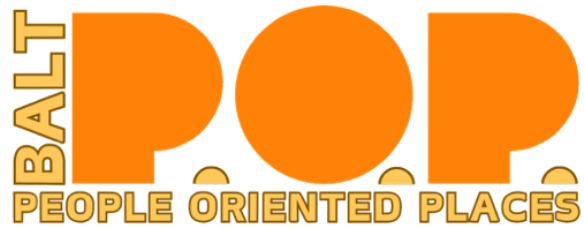
Uploaded by: Michael Scepaniak

Position: FWA

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>

SB0526-EEE_MACo_OPP.pdf

Uploaded by: Sarah Sample

Position: UNF



Senate Bill 526

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

MACo Position: **OPPOSE**

To: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Committee

Date: February 12, 2025

From: Sarah Sample

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **OPPOSES** SB 526. While well-intentioned, this bill would place a costly mandate on county governments to carry out new state policies to create sidewalks and crosswalks as alternative routes for all public-school students. **MACo does not raise policy objections to the bill's goal of ensuring safe routes for students – county concerns are merely practical and cost-driven.**

As a rule, MACo resists state policies that result in costly or burdensome local implementation. SB 526 would implement a costly, logistically difficult mandate for counties to implement. The prior year fiscal notes highlighted several counties in which this proposal would be extremely costly to execute. That feedback highlights construction and renovation costs rising to multiple millions of dollars. Others anticipate the need to purchase additional buses and hire bus drivers to meet the requirements of the bill. Redistricting is also an acknowledged means to compliance in the bill, which is a significant barrier to cross in order to comply – and notably, county government lacks the ability to make such changes.

Additionally, the route to school may not be subject to just the jurisdiction of the county, as municipal or State-owned roadways may compose part, or even all, of the route. This bill unfairly requires counties to develop a plan with the controller of the road and re-direct county resources to construct sidewalks and crosswalks on roads not owned by the county. This is all while there is no obligation for the State to participate in the mandate or renovations when their highways are implicated by the study.

Furthermore, the one-size-fits-all mandate of SB 526 simply does not fit the transportation and geographic realities of Maryland counties. Counties – and schools – face diverse geographic challenges, transportation laws (like rights-of-way), and community characteristics that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to apply SB 526 to all 24 jurisdictions. Under state law, counties would have no choice but to fund the significant costs associated with SB 526 – competing for limited local funds against education, school construction, public safety, and other essential public services.

Counties agree with the intent of SB 526 and that the information it seeks to collect is important in understanding the needs of Maryland students, but this legislation goes too far in mandating county resources of an unknown amount, all while neglecting the logistical capacities of counties to implement it. For this reason, MACo **OPPOSES** SB 526 and urges an **UNFAVORABLE** report.

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Uploaded by: Sasha Desrouleaux

Position: INFO



THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY GOVERNMENT

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

BILL: Senate Bill 526: Counties - Construction of Sidewalks and Crosswalks - Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools

SPONSORS: Senators Arthur Ellis and Karen Lewis Young

HEARING DATE: February 12, 2025 1:00PM

COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment

CONTACT: Intergovernmental Affairs Office, 301-780-8411

POSITION: INFORMATIONAL ONLY

The office of the Acting Prince George's County Executive presents to members of the committee this informational letter regarding **Senate Bill 526: Counties - Construction of Sidewalks and Crosswalks - Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools**, requiring a county board of education each year to prepare and post to the county's website a report that identifies pathways that public school students, who are ineligible for transportation services, may use to travel to school using only safe alternative routes under certain circumstances; and, requiring the governing body of a county each year to review a certain report and construct any sidewalks and crosswalks necessary to create safe alternative routes for public school students under certain circumstances. A "safe alternative route" is defined to include (1) a road with sidewalks and, at intersections, crosswalks; (2) a foot path; and (3) a bike path. If the county governing body must alter a road that is not subject to the jurisdiction of the county to meet the bill's requirements, the governing body must develop a plan with the governmental entity or person that has control of the road and make reasonable efforts to execute the plan in an expeditious manner. As drafted, this proposal introduces possible risks and complications to ongoing local assessments, without removing existing barriers nor providing for a funding mechanism to fulfill the requirements of the legislation.

While Senate Bill 526 is in line with the goals of Vision Zero Prince George's: reaching zero crashes on roads within the county by 2040 and among other objectives providing a safe route to school for all students, the proposal is likely to interfere with ongoing local efforts to conduct holistic assessments and planning associated with the development process in Prince George's County, to include

pursuit of the necessary authorizations from the various stakeholders involved such as right-of-way acquisition, engineering studies for safety and stormwater management impacts, utility relocations, ADA accommodations being some of the most pressing. Specifically, today, Prince George's County Department of Public Works and Transportation is conducting a comprehensive countywide sidewalk inventory which will identify the quality of current facilities as well as where gaps in the network may exist. The inventory will also provide criteria for how best to prioritize future improvements. This critical information will provide the county with a valuable tool in helping to address and achieve many of the objectives of SB 526, rendering this proposal a duplicative and burdensome layer in this jurisdiction.

As you may be aware, Prince George's County has remained a vocal advocate to enhanced access, mobility and connectivity in a safe environment, which is why this administration is intimately familiar with the realities faced on the group in our jurisdiction. As such, this administration must raise very serious concerns regarding a requirement to construct sidewalks along county, municipal, state, and private roads as an unfunded mandate. The fiscal impact to the county's Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPW&T), Prince George's County Public School and the county will be significantly high. Further, DPW&T would be responsible for the construction of any sidewalks and crosswalks identified as necessary. The Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) is responsible for building, providing access to, and maintaining state roadways. While construction of the sidewalks may be done by the State all the maintenance costs would be borne by the local government – thus exasperating the local financial impact. Further, the costs to the county's public school system associated with generating an actionable, annual report will be even more costly to the counties to then build and maintain these to items. Between the 2023 and 2024 fiscal notes for the respective year's version of this bill, several counties highlighted challenges in which this proposal would be extremely costly to execute.

While the County strongly supports the goals and intentions of this legislation, we do believe that this should be a shared responsibility at the federal state, county and municipal level and not place a singular burden of a costly unfunded mandate on Prince George's County in order to carry out state policies to create sidewalks and crosswalks as alternative routes for all public school students.