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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB 439 Vehicle Laws – Fully Autonomous Vehicles – Human Safety Operators and Reporting Requirements Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart February 6, 2025 | Environment & Transportation Committee

What the Bill Does:

This bill would prevent Maryland roads from being the testing ground for unproven technology. The use of autonomous trucks (over 10,000 pounds) without humans inside the vehicle has not been tested in any state. It is unclear how these humanless trucks would handle weather emergencies or vehicle breakdowns. Large companies are desperate to lower their labor costs by putting these vehicles on our roads as soon as possible. They are currently planning tests on rural highways in Texas.

This bill would require human operators for any autonomous trucking experiments in Maryland. It would also require the companies building and operating these vehicles to report safety data to the state government. With a sponsor amendment, the Connected and Automated Vehicles (CAV) Working Group within the Maryland Department of Transportation would evaluate the continued need for this legislation every three years and report their findings to the General Assembly.

Why the Bill is Important:

A few short years ago, autonomous vehicles seemed like a distant dream. Today, they are rapidly becoming a reality, with the potential to revolutionize transportation, reduce traffic fatalities, and improve efficiency. However, with great promise comes great responsibility. We must balance innovation with public safety to ensure this technology benefits all Marylanders.

HB 439 prioritizes public safety while laying the groundwork for transparency and accountability in the burgeoning AV industry. Heavy autonomous trucks, in particular, pose unique challenges. At over 10,000 pounds, these vehicles have the potential to cause significant harm. Requiring a human safety operator ensures that there is always someone on hand to respond to

emergencies, mitigate risks, and protect lives. In emergencies, these operators can perform functions beyond the current capabilities of AV systems, such as communicating with other drivers, assisting accident victims, or deploying safety measures like flares. This safeguard is not a barrier to innovation; it is a necessary precaution to build public trust in autonomous vehicles.

Transparency is equally critical. By mandating reporting on crashes, traffic violations, and disengagement incidents, HB 439 provides lawmakers, regulators, and the public with the data needed to understand the risks and benefits of AV technology. This level of accountability is essential as we navigate this uncharted territory.

Other states and countries have already begun implementing policies to address the safety and accountability of autonomous vehicles. For example, California has stringent reporting requirements for AV companies, providing transparency that has helped regulators and the public understand the technology's impact. By adopting similar measures, Maryland can position itself as a leader in autonomous vehicle safety and innovation, ensuring that this technology is introduced responsibly and equitably.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably:

We live in an age of unprecedented technological development. While autonomous vehicles are not a daily occurrence on our roadways here in Maryland, they soon will be. The safety of these trucks is increasing every year and this bill is not intended to stall the march of progress. But there is little reason for Maryland to be the testing ground for autonomous trucks before they are fully tested and vetted. At this juncture, there is no upside to Marylanders to drive alongside humanless trucks.

HB 439 is a common-sense bill that strikes the right balance between innovation and safety, while embracing new technology and all that it will bring for the future of transportation in Maryland. **I urge a favorable report.**