

January 31, 2025

The Honorable William C. Smith, Jr.
Chair, Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Letter of Support – Senate Bill 424 – Urban State Highways - Speed Limits - Exceptions

Dear Chair Smith and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) supports Senate Bill 424 as it provides another context-driven tool that can be used to improve safety and reduce road incidents on urban highways.

SB 424 enables the State Highway Administration (SHA) to reduce the speed limit on an urban highway by five miles per hour without performing a traffic or engineering study. An urban highway is defined as a roadway within a municipality (not including expressways) which features curb, gutter, and closed drainage, and is located within a U.S. Census defined urban area where significant pedestrian traffic is observed.

Of the over 570 fatalities on Maryland's roads in 2024, a disproportionate amount (28 percent) were vulnerable roadway users.¹ This legislation is a critical tool that can be used to accelerate efforts towards achieving zero traffic deaths and serious injuries in Maryland, specifically where known issues exist. Data shows that, in Maryland and nationally, more frequent crashes occur on state and locally-owned roads in urban areas where population density is higher and a greater amount of vulnerable road users are present. Further, more severe crashes occur on state-owned roads where speeds are generally higher. Finally, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) findings show that speeding or traveling too fast for conditions was a contributing factor in almost 31 percent of all traffic fatalities in Maryland. This exceeds the nationwide average of 29 percent.

Reflecting these realities, the State is responding to an increasing number of requests for speed limit reductions on State highways where posted speed limits no longer correspond to roadway context. Maryland adopted Vision Zero and SHA published the *Context Driven: Access and Mobility for All Users Guide* to establish a framework for understanding the relationship between access and mobility and to address serious injuries and deaths on our roadways. Since

¹ Final fatality figures from 2024 are not yet available.

adoption, speed limit reductions on State roads have been one of the top three most requested engineering safety countermeasures implemented by SHA, with more than 47 corridors assessed at the request of local jurisdictions or following a serious injury or fatality. Of these requested speed studies, 46 resulted in the reduction of posted speeds. A typical study takes SHA approximately three months and upwards of ten thousand dollars to complete. Additionally, the studies must be accommodated within a variety of SHA's ongoing and competing priorities.

SB 424 provides SHA with the option – not a requirement – to forgo a speed study. It is important to note that even if SHA elects not to require a speed study, it will still apply proven standards and best practices to ensure all implementations of speed reductions are safe and manage vehicle operational impacts. This includes thorough reviews of the extents of speed reduction areas, the implementation of appropriate signage, and exploring physical improvements to support reduced posted speed limits and improve compliance with speed limits. SB 424 provides SHA with a way to respond in a more agile manner to areas where speed is a contributor to roadway incidents in urban areas of the state. This ability, in conjunction with tools such as the Pedestrian Safety Action Plan, the Context Guide for engineering, and the recently adopted MDOT Complete Streets policy allows SHA to plan, design, and engineer roadways that are responsive to the environment around them.

SB 424 also aligns with recommendations in the Federal Highway Administration's *Safe System Approach for Speed Management* report which found that small changes result in improved outcomes for roadway users. Other states like Washington and Florida have adopted similar strategies for speed management where speed limit reductions by five miles per hour are used to achieve target speeds and increase compliance over time. These results increase exponentially when combined with complimentary tools in engineering, education, and enforcement to achieve target operational speeds.

Despite dedicated work and collaboration since the state adopted Vision Zero, the state is falling short on its goals to eliminate roadway fatalities and serious injuries. This bill acknowledges two key realities. First, business as usual is not working. We must do more to promote the safety of our transportation network. Second, everyone who can improve safety must act. MDOT has been hard at work engineering safer streets and educating drivers to practice safe driving behaviors. We have also partnered with others to improve enforcement and emergency response. We are now redoubling efforts by optimizing our programs, plans, and policies for safety along with advancing important legislative proposals and advocacy in the safety space. This bill is an opportunity for the General Assembly to add another tool that will empower SHA's drive to create safer streets throughout the State.

For these reasons, the Maryland Department of Transportation respectfully requests the Committee grant Senate Bill 424 a favorable report.

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Respectfully submitted,

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