

HB1491 Written Testimony - Environment and Transportation Committee (3/12 at 1:00 p.m.)

Education - Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission - Establishment

Baltimore County Student Councils

Saan Rhyne - Eastern Technical High School Student

Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is Saan Rhyne and I am a student from Baltimore County. I write to you on behalf of students in Maryland to request a favorable report on House Bill 1491.

House Bill 1491, crossfiled with Senate Bill 71, establishes a commission to identify, coordinate, and secure funding for safe walking and biking pathways for students traveling to and from school, and report annually to the Governor and specific legislative committees on funding opportunities discovered, recommendations for infrastructure improvements, and progress on coordinated safe route projects.

Transportation is one of the largest barriers to students attending school. When there are gaps in school transportation systems, students suffer and lose the ability to have a complete education. Dangerous commutes are directly linked to absenteeism, and studies show that expansion of safe routes to school lead to higher attendance rates.

Recently, Maryland faced one of the largest winter storms in recent years. The Baltimore County Public Schools system reopened schools approximately one week after the storm, when sidewalks and roads were still covered in snow. Many students were forced to walk on roads, or face sidewalks covered in snow and slick with ice. For over a week following the return to school, some of my peers and myself had to walk on Mace Avenue as part of getting to school, due to sidewalks being covered in snow and ice and being unsafe to walk on. We had to walk on the same road as trucks, cars driven by parents, and student drivers driving 30 miles per hour, or over. Around that same time period, a bus crash occurred in Essex, injuring 3 students. This is dangerous for students, drivers, and for school systems.

This bill establishes a roadmap for long-term statewide safety infrastructure by creating a coordinated, statewide strategy to address the dangers posed by travel routes to and from schools. Currently, responsibility for school travel falls across multiple jurisdictions: counties, municipalities, state agencies, and regional planners, which causes fragmented planning and inconsistent design. By filling the structural gap between jurisdictions, the bill will secure and streamline funding and planning processes.

All students deserve a safe route to school, regardless of where they live, what school or county they attend, and the weather conditions. Accordingly, I respectfully request a favorable report on HB1491 from the committee. Thank you for your time.