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Committee: Environment and Transportation
Testimony on: HB 656 – “Safe Access for All (SAFE) Roads Act of 2022”
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: February 17, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB 656, which would require the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) to improve pedestrian and bicycle rider safety in the state. The State Highway Administration (SHA) would be required to conduct an analysis of the corridors and intersections across the state where pedestrian and bike rider injuries and fatalities occur, and then recommend engineering and safety improvements that would eliminate those accidents. SHA also would develop a budget and timeline for implementing each engineering and safety improvement.

The bill specifies annual spending levels for budget areas involving pedestrian and bicycle safety for fiscal years 2024 through 2028, and those amounts would be increased by 10 percent annually for fiscal years 2025 through 2028. Finally, when a new construction or improvement project would take more than 12 months to complete, near-term improvements must be made to enhance safety in the interim.

We live in a car-centric culture where transportation planning, roads and vehicle laws are focused on getting cars and trucks to their destinations as swiftly as possible. And with more and heavier SUVs on the road than ever before, this has resulted in high rates of injury and death for pedestrians and bicyclists. The correlation between speed and crash severity is well documented. Combining excessive speed with poor roadway and intersection designs can yield horrifying results. According to the MDOT Motor Vehicle Administration’s Highway Safety Office, there were 542 traffic fatalities in our state last year, including 132 pedestrian and bicycle deaths.

Not everyone is able to drive, for reasons including age, health, and finances. The state transportation system needs to promote equity by assuring that everyone has a safe way to get to their job, education, and housing. We need roadway design that prioritizes safety for drivers, bike riders and pedestrians.

Transportation is now the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in our state. Tailpipe emissions are also a major source of health-damaging air pollution. There is a growing need to get individuals out of their cars, to take transit, ride bikes and scooters, and walk more. These modes significantly reduce air pollution and can increase physical health.

In summary, the high number of pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities that continue to occur on our roadways is unacceptable and indicates new measures must be undertaken to dramatically lessen and ideally eliminate all traffic deaths. HB 656 would help make that happen. We urge a favorable report on this bill.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.