



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

February 15, 2012

Chairman Mel Franklin
Committee on Planning, Zoning, and Economic Development
Prince George's County Council
14741 Governor Oden Bowie Drive
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772

RE: Support CB-2-2012, "Adequate Public Pedestrian and Bikeway Facilities in Centers and Corridors"

Dear Chairman Franklin and members of the Committee:

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. My organization works to ensure that transportation and development decisions in the Washington, D.C. region, including the Maryland suburbs, accommodate growth while revitalizing communities, providing more housing and travel choices, and conserving our natural and historic areas.

I am here to express our strong support for this important bill, which we call the "walk/bike connections" bill. This bill helps ensure that Prince George's residents and visitors have better and safer transportation choices. By allowing the Planning Board to ensure that developments fill in missing links of essential sidewalk and other walk/bike facilities around a new development, the quality of development, as well as safety and access, will be improved. Offering multimodal transportation choices has been the intention of the County for several years through the "Complete Streets" policy adopted in the 2009 County Master Plan for Transportation. This bill helps implement this policy in the development review process.

Developers currently have no obligation to invest in missing sidewalks, hazardous crossings, or other basic pedestrian or bicycle infrastructure that connect their development to nearby destinations. This is despite the fact that the same development may be required to pay millions of dollars to expand road capacity for motor vehicles far from the site. A development that locates close to a Metro station, bus stop, stores, schools, parks, libraries, etc. may tout its proximity – or name it the "Townhomes at Metro" -- but will provide no contribution to filling in a missing sidewalk link, making a pedestrian crossing safer, or anything else that would make nearby destinations more accessible by walking or bicycling. A development might claim that recreation space is provided off-site at a public park – but if there are missing sidewalk links and other road crossing hazards, the recreation is not very accessible. A school in walking distance to a new subdivision is only as accessible as the walk/bike facilities allow. Not allowing the Planning Board to make these essential links as a part of the development review process is an oversight that this bill corrects.

The bill asks the county to make a finding that adequate walk and bike facilities will serve the new subdivision internally and in the surrounding area. This is similar to what is already done for roadways. This assessment looks at sidewalks, street lights, street trees, safe crossings, bike lanes, trails, bike parking etc. within the walk/biking distance of the subdivision (up to 1/2 mile off-site). If the area lacks adequate facilities, the developer may be required to construct sidewalks and other walk/bike facilities within existing public easements or rights of way, depending on how large the development is. The bill also caps the cost for the developer. The bill instructs the Planning Board to develop appropriate quality/level of service standards for walking and bicycling, as has been done in progressive communities around the country.

This bill is a reasonable approach to working with new developments to contribute needed walk/bike connections that can reduce overall cost and traffic. Walk and bicycle infrastructure is far less costly than roadway construction. Allowing for multimodal transportation improvements enabled through this bill will reduce overall infrastructure costs associated with road capacity expansions. Even small reductions in vehicle trips can make a significant difference in traffic congestion. By reducing vehicle trips, everyone benefits in this process. The developer can pay for less expensive transportation infrastructure and trip reduction strategies (through Transportation Demand Management – TDM), new residents and businesses enjoy better and safer transportation options to access nearby destinations, and surrounding communities experience less traffic.

While there are many positive benefits we can cite about this bill, the bill also addresses a grave problem in the county – pedestrian deaths. Prince George’s County consistently has more pedestrian fatalities than any other jurisdiction in the region or the state of Maryland. Between 1999 and 2010, Prince George’s suffered an average of 25 fatalities a year. The second highest Maryland jurisdiction, Baltimore County, had an average of 16 pedestrian fatalities a year. In the Washington, D.C. region, Prince George’s also leads the area in the number of pedestrian deaths. The County has pedestrian fatalities more than the District of Columbia, which has a far higher number of pedestrians. These stark numbers tell us that the county needs to change and address its pedestrian safety problem. This bill is part of the solution. While state roads account for many pedestrian fatalities, the same is true for other Maryland counties. This bill can help fund some of the critical missing pedestrian safety facilities on state roads, as well as local. Missing sidewalks, poor crossings, and inadequate lighting are all contributing factors to pedestrian deaths. The county needs to take reasonable steps to address these pedestrian facilities and improve its safety record. One of the ways to improve pedestrian safety and reduce these grim statistics is to require that new developments make similar contributions for walk/bike facilities that they already do for roads.

We urge you to support this bill and advance it to the full council for a public hearing and final vote.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Cort
Policy Director