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**Committee:** ENV                               **Date:** 2/12/13                               **Bill #:** HB 339  
**Position:** LETTER OF INFORMATION                               **Title:** Vehicle Laws - Bicycles - Required Use of Protective Headgear

**Explanation:** House Bill 339 would expand the requirement to wear a helmet to all bicycle riders regardless of age.

**Comment:** The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) takes no position on HB 339, but is providing this letter of information to help inform the committee deliberations and stands ready to assist in any way it can. MDOT is committed to promoting safety. However, mandatory helmet measures raise a number of important issues, with several competing factors to consider.

Current law only requires bicycle riders up to the age of 16 to wear a helmet. This proposal would expand that requirement to all bicycle riders, regardless of age. Head injuries are the most serious type of injury and the most common cause of death for bicyclists. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that 70% of fatal bike crashes involve head injuries; however, only about 20 to 25% of bicycle riders actually wear helmets. NHTSA further reports that bicycle helmets are 85 to 88% effective in mitigating head injuries.

The Bike Helmet Safety Institute reports that 45 to 88% of cyclists' brain injuries could be prevented by helmet use, saving an estimated \$81 million annually in injury-related direct costs. NHTSA provides that every \$1 spent on a bicycle helmet saves society \$30 in indirect medical costs. A 2001 analysis of 18 studies on bicycle helmet effectiveness concluded that helmets reduce the risk of death as well as head, brain, and facial injury in accidents involving bicycle operators. The report further concluded that, overall, helmets decrease the risk of head and brain injury by 70 to 88% and facial injury to the upper and mid face by 65%. Countless research studies have thus demonstrated that helmets are the most effective means of preventing head and brain injury for bicycle operators.

However, there are other factors to consider when contemplating this topic that impact safety and bicycle ridership. While helmet use is effective in preventing death and serious injury, it must be noted that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report that, of over half a million bicycle injuries annually, there are only around 700 fatalities (approximately 0.14%). This is a generally small number given that most bicycle riders ride off road, and when they do ride on the road, most do not ride on higher speed roads where serious crashes may occur.

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Moreover, requiring helmets for all riders regardless of age could potentially limit bicycle ridership, which is a concern. Research is consistently finding that “safety in numbers” is a large and significant factor for cyclist safety. One study noted that after Australia passed a mandatory helmet use law cycling dropped by as much as 30 percent. This would have a negative impact on safety, as well as bikesharing and other businesses that depend on bicycling. Goals 4 and 5 of the Maryland 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan call for measures that would increase bicycling. This may prove to inhibit achieving that goal, as it likely poses an impediment for bikeshare program in Maryland. Mandatory helmet use is practically incompatible with bikeshare program as it is currently designed and would complicate efforts by either requiring users to wear helmets and/or forcing Maryland bikestations to provide helmet vending machines. Several cities have repealed mandatory helmet laws to facilitate bikeshare.

Safe bicycling is a sustainable, environmentally friendly, and healthy mode of transportation that MDOT supports and is committed to increasing. However, the answer to the question on the overall safety impact of mandatory helmet requirement laws for all ages is not completely clear, and may not be as obvious as it would appear to be on first glance.

For these reasons, MDOT respectfully requests that the Committee consider these comments when deliberating on the bill