

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Third Reader - Revised

House Bill 731

(Delegate Ruth, et al.)

Environment and Transportation

Education, Energy, and the Environment

Wildlife - Protections and Highway Crossings

This bill establishes the Maryland Connectivity Coalition (MCC) to, generally, improve wildlife habitat connectivity and reduce wildlife and motor vehicle collisions in the State. The bill establishes responsibilities related to the coalition for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the State Highway Administration (SHA). Local jurisdictions must consider wildlife movement and habitat connectivity when enacting, adopting, amending, or executing their comprehensive plans; the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) must coordinate with DNR and SHA to provided related and specified information to local governments. DNR and SHA may adopt regulations necessary to implement specified provisions of the bill. The bill takes effect July 1, 2025.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Transportation Trust Fund (TTF) expenditures increase by an estimated \$50,000 annually beginning in FY 2026. Revenues are not affected.

Table with 6 columns: (in dollars), FY 2026, FY 2027, FY 2028, FY 2029, FY 2030. Rows include Revenues, SF Expenditure, and Net Effect.

Note:() = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: Local government operations and finances are not anticipated to be materially affected, as discussed below.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary:

Maryland Connectivity Coalition

The purpose of MCC is to foster collaboration among State and federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders to (1) protect threatened and endangered species from habitat fragmentation that reduces access to resources such as food or potential mates; (2) protect motorists and wildlife in the State by reducing collisions between vehicles and wildlife; and (3) facilitate the sharing of resources, data, and expertise relating to wildlife habitat connectivity.

Although the bill does not specify which State agency must provide staff for MCC, the bill requires (1) the State Highway Administrator or the Administrator's designee to serve as chair of MCC and (2) DNR and SHA to adopt rules for MCC, including membership rules, the roles and responsibilities of the leadership of MCC, the role of specified members, and meeting rules and procedures.

MCC must:

- develop criteria for prioritizing wildlife connectivity projects, which may include locations that meet specified conditions, equity in distributing funds between different regions of the State and urban, suburban, and rural areas, and any other criteria identified by MCC;
- develop performance metrics to evaluate the success of funded projects, including measurable outcomes, as specified, and enhancements to habitat connectivity;
- meet quarterly – although a meeting may be cancelled for lack of an agenda – to (1) share new data, analyses, and research; (2) identify any additional data, analyses, or research needed; (3) update the members on the status of planned or ongoing wildlife crossings; (4) identify locations where additional wildlife connectivity is needed; and (5) make recommendations on funding for wildlife connectivity; and
- develop a website and publish specified information on the website relating to MCC and its activities, information to educate the public on the importance of wildlife connectivity and wildlife crossings and completed crossings and crossings under development.

SHA has final decision-making authority regarding any decision relating to the placement, funding, or design of wildlife crossings.

Local Government Comprehensive Plans

Local jurisdictions must consider wildlife movement and habitat connectivity when enacting, adopting, amending, or executing their comprehensive plans. MDP must coordinate with DNR and SHA to provide each local jurisdiction with updated information on habitat connectivity concerns and current and planned wildlife crossings.

Reporting

SHA must report on wildlife crossings in each *Consolidated Transportation Program* (CTP) of the State. The report must include TTF expenditures for wildlife crossings, wildlife crossings planned and in process, and performance metrics and measurable outcomes evaluating the success of completed wildlife crossings.

Current Law:

State Highway Administration

SHA is responsible for more than 5,200 miles or approximately 16,800 lane miles of road, 2,500 bridges, 3,500 small stream crossing structures, and 80 miles of sound/noise barriers in the State. It also has responsibility for planning, designing, constructing, and maintaining these roads and bridges to safety and performance standards while considering sociological, ecological, and economic concerns. SHA must construct, reconstruct, and repair State highways as necessary and maintain them in good condition.

Endangered Species Protections

The Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act governs the protection of threatened and endangered species at the State level. Among other things, the Act includes specifications for the Secretary of Natural Resources in adding or removing plants and animals from the [threatened and endangered species lists](#), prohibits certain activities that involve threatened and endangered species, including the possession and export of any such species; and establishes special additional protections for certain species.

Additionally, DNR's [Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan](#) outlines strategic conservation approaches for wildlife and wildlife habitats in the State. The plan is a strategy to guide the conservation of the State's wide range of fish, wildlife, and habitats, providing the framework and overall direction for wildlife and broader biodiversity conservation efforts in Maryland. The plan is required for the State to receive funding from the federal government's [State Wildlife Grants Program](#). Among other federal requirements, the plan compiles, evaluates, and presents summary status information for Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Local Comprehensive Plans

Local jurisdictions are required to enact, adopt, amend, and execute a comprehensive plan in accordance with State law. Certain elements must be included in a comprehensive plan and a comprehensive plan also must include and implement specified visions stated in the law. At least once every 10 years, the planning commission of a local jurisdiction must review the comprehensive plan and, if necessary, revise or amend the plan to include all required elements and the specified visions. A sensitive areas element is one of the required elements of a plan, which must include the goals, objectives, principles, policies, and standards designed to protect sensitive areas from the adverse effects of development.

State Expenditures: In the execution of its duties, SHA often engages expert consultants to handle research, evaluation, studies, and staffing duties. To meet the bill's requirements, SHA anticipates engaging a consultant to assist with coalition research and staffing duties. Therefore, TTF expenditures increase by \$50,000 annually beginning in fiscal 2026 for consultant services.

DNR and MDP can meet the bill's requirements using existing budgeted resources. In addition, SHA can include the required information in the CTP using existing budgeted resources.

This analysis does not reflect any additional funding for wildlife connectivity projects, as the bill itself does not require that any such projects be undertaken. To the extent the bill leads to the prioritization of any such projects, however, it is assumed that such projects merely replace other projects that otherwise would have been funded with TTF, or perhaps, federal funds.

Local Fiscal Effect: The bill requires that local jurisdictions consider wildlife movement and habitat connectivity when enacting, adopting, amending, or executing their comprehensive plans. Based on a limited survey of local governments, this requirement is not anticipated to significantly affect local government operations or finances.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: SB 635 (Senators Lewis Young and Rosapepe) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Department of Natural Resources; Maryland Department of Planning; Maryland Department of Transportation; Maryland Department of the Environment; Maryland Association of Counties; Harford and Montgomery counties; Maryland Municipal League; City of Frederick; National Wildlife Federation; Federal Highway Administration; Department of Legislative Services

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