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**Testimony to the House Environment and Transportation Committee  
HB 582 – Maryland Transportation Authority –  
Options for the Payment of Tolls and Civil Penalties –  
Position: Favorable**

March 3, 2022

The Honorable Kumar Barve  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
Room 251, House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401  
cc: Members, Environment and Transportation Committee

**Honorable Chair Barve and Members of the Committee:**

I'm a consumer advocate and Executive Director of Consumer Auto, a nonprofit group that works for safety, transparency, and fair treatment for Maryland drivers and car buyers.

Consumer Auto supports **HB 582** because we believe it would provide some much-needed relief to many thousands of Maryland drivers who face burdensome delayed toll charges, fines, and other punishments for toll violations. That relief is particularly pressing now as millions of long-delayed toll charges will be arriving in mailboxes across Maryland through at least the middle of this year – causing new debts, millions of dollars in fines, and other problems for drivers. And while the MdTA has offered a temporary grace period that involves suspending additional fines for unpaid tolls for the time being, it only last through Nov. 30 and only those who can pay off their outstanding balance in full by that time will have their fines waived.

Fines for toll violations have long created serious problems for many Marylanders, especially for lower-income drivers who rely on their vehicles but may not have an EZ-Pass account or have one connected to a credit card that can automatically pay toll fees. When a toll fee is issued by mail, fines begin to accrue just 30 days after the notice is issued. In part because Maryland charges relatively high fines (now \$25 for each late toll violation charge, often for an underlying fee of just \$2 to \$4) and because the Central Collection Unit (CCU) charges an additional 17% fee to those with outstanding debts in collection, those fees can mount quickly.

For too many Marylanders, especially those who live paycheck to paycheck or struggle to pay their bills, these fines and fees can quickly turn into a debt trap. Maryland is also one of just eight states that still suspend vehicle registrations because of outstanding toll debts.

Sadly, the well-known problems prompted by MDTA's sudden transition to all-electronic tolling early in the pandemic and the backlog of toll fees that accrued when the agency decided to pause sending out video toll charges for many months beginning in March 2020 now seem likely to cause many more Marylanders to be hit by such difficulties.

When MDTA adopted cashless tolling, those without an EZ pass account, in particular, began racking up video toll charges. But because MDTA stopped sending out the bills, drivers could



## **Auto Consumer Alliance**

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easily lose track of the toll fees they were accumulating as notices were delayed for many months. MDTA also paused posting toll transactions for the Inter County Connector for some months in July 2020 because of concerns about the accuracy of its tolling.

As a consequence, in addition to issuing current charges, the MDTA has said it will be working at least until mid- 2022 to send out a backlog of 23 million toll fee notices it began to issue in Oct. 2020. Many drivers are now receiving large monthly bills for fees they incurred many months ago – fees they may not remember or find difficult to verify. In recent months, the EZ-Pass service center has been overwhelmed by many thousands of calls each day from frustrated drivers, who often have to wait two hours or more to speak with someone about their charges. And since many of these charges are for fees incurred many months ago, they often go to old addresses and fail to reach drivers in a timely fashion.

Drivers need additional relief from the large overhang of toll debt they're being hit with – and from the many toll violation fees that are sure to follow. This bill would provide two important forms of relief: 1) requiring MDTA to offer drivers who owe more than \$300 the opportunity to manage their debt through monthly installment payments of 10% of the outstanding debt; and 2) requiring the agency to waive civil citation fines in cases where the MDTA sent out the fee notice more than 60 days after the toll transaction.

Moving people facing significant toll debt into installment plans should help them better manage their debts and avoid collection issues that would damage their credit record. Forgiving fines for fees MDTA issued more than 60 days late could save indebted Marylanders as much as \$45.7 million in additional fees – and would ease the unfairness of getting hit with fines for long-forgotten transactions that are difficult to verify.

Without the kind of relief this bill offers, thousands more Marylanders will be stuck with burdensome debts, unfair citations, collection issues that undermine their credit – and may even lose the ability to drive legally – as a result of belated toll charges and the ensuing fines for late payments on them.

**We support HB 582 and ask you to give it a FAVORABLE report.**

Sincerely,

Franz Schneiderman  
Consumer Auto