



**Testimony to the House Environment and Transportation Committee
HB 29 – Vehicle Laws – Failure to Pay Video Toll – Reform of 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 works for safety, transparency, and fair treatment for Maryland drivers and car buyers.

Consumer Auto supports **HB 29** because we believe Maryland's existing practice of suspending vehicle registrations over relatively small toll debts is unduly punitive – especially for lower-income drivers who can quickly fall into debt traps as a result of Maryland's rather high toll violation fines and aggressive collection practices. Discontinuing the practice of suspending registrations as a result of those fines would relieve some of that pressure – and prevent some of those who struggle to pay these fines from facing still greater legal difficulties as they continue to drive (sometimes on suspended tags) to get to work and meet their other needs.

In the past these suspensions have impacted a surprisingly large number of Marylanders. Between 2015 and 2018, the MdTA put a hold on the renewal of vehicle registrations of more than 207,000 Marylanders and about 22,000 Marylanders had their tags suspended because of toll violations.

The many problems surrounding the state's move to all-cashless tolling and the huge backlog of 23 million toll fees that accrued while charges were suspended during the pandemic – and that the MDTA will be doling out to drivers for many more months – seem certain to make this situation even worse. With many drivers struggling to pay hundreds of dollars in belated toll fees arriving in recent months, outstanding debt and penalty fees are mounting for many – and putting many more drivers in the kind of toll debt that can cause them to get their vehicle registrations suspended.

After a state audit revealed that tens of thousands of Marylanders have been overcharged at Maryland's five cash-less toll facilities, we also have to wonder about the accuracy of some of the charges that are arriving on drivers' doorsteps. And many of these belated charges can be very difficult for drivers to verify – especially given the customer services struggles facing MdTA and the very long wait times drivers face when they try to call to sort out their bills.

While I'm glad to see that the MdTA has offered a temporary grace period that involves suspending additional fines for unpaid tolls for the time being, that suspension will only last through Nov. 30 and only those who pay off their outstanding balance in full by that time will have fines waived.



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Yet these late-arriving toll charges have already created toll debts and accumulated fines for thousands of Marylanders. And since it is often lower-income Marylanders who are subject to video tolling because they lack an EZ-Pass transponder – or whose EZ-Pass accounts may fall into arrears because they can't automatically pay by credit card – those fines will hurt many Marylanders who are struggling financially and imperil the ability of some of those people to drive legally.

For too many Marylanders, these fines indeed can quickly become a kind of financial quicksand. They create a debt trap – and a threat to the vehicle registrations they need to maintain to be able to get to work, pursue their education, or access the services and supports they and their families need. And for those who struggle to pay these debts, the toll fees and fines can lead to criminal sanctions for driving an unregistered vehicle.

Only eight states now suspend or revoke vehicle registrations for outstanding toll violations. Maryland can provide relief to hard-pressed residents by joining the 42 states that DO NOT suspend or revoke registrations for toll fines.

We support HB 29 and ask you to give it a FAVORABLE report.

Sincerely,

Franz Schneiderman
Consumer Auto