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TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE
ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

October 6, 2016

Mr. Gregory Johnson
Administrator
State Highway Administration
707 North Calvert Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Dear Administrator Johnson:

Last February, three members of a Bethesda family were killed when their vehicle was struck by another vehicle as they were attempting to cross River Road (MD 190) to Braeburn Parkway. They were on their way to a school play at Walt Whitman High School.

Since the crash, which took the lives of a mother, father and their son who was set to graduate from Whitman High School in May, the State Highway Administration (SHA) has agreed to add traffic-activated overhead flashing signs and implement turning restrictions in an interim effort to enhance safety. The SHA is also studying concepts for creating a new intersection at the nearby pedestrian crossing at River Road and Pyle Road, which would close the intersection where this tragedy occurred.

Despite these changes, we believe that there is an equally important step your agency should take as soon as possible: **designating this stretch of River Road as a School Zone**. This designation would allow SHA to lower the current speed limit from 45 miles per hour. Lowering vehicle speeds is vital to making this area safer, and that will continue to be the case even as your agency implements its planned improvements for the existing intersection.

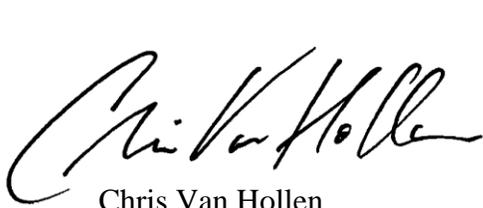
In the case of the February 27, 2016 crash, police reported the driver of the vehicle who hit the victims' vehicle was traveling at speeds as high as 115 miles per hour before braking and colliding into the family's vehicle at about 75 miles per hour. Drivers on this section of River Road, which crests just before a major entrance point to the school, simply go too fast.

While Walt Whitman High School has a Whittier Boulevard address, the day-to-day reality is that a substantial percentage of students, parents and visitors access the school via Braeburn Parkway. There is also a marked but non-signalized pedestrian crosswalk just east of the intersection that is widely used by students who walk to the school from the south side of River Road. Both the Braeburn Parkway intersection and the pedestrian crosswalk are within half a mile of the school's entrance. This pedestrian crosswalk is in dire need of more prominent road markings and flashing lights/signage indicating an upcoming pedestrian crossing.

There is precedent for designating this type of area as a School Zone. We understand that SHA recently gave the School Zone designation to a similar section of roadway near a school in Prince George's County. We urge you to recognize the reality on the ground – not the formal address – in designating this stretch of River Road as a School Zone. We believe that doing so will help save lives.

Long before the February 2016 crash, many in the community urged the SHA to make safety improvements to this intersection, efforts that resulted in studies but no action. There is now no excuse not to take every action available to us.

We look forward to your response.



Chris Van Hollen
Member of Congress



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