

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Department of Transportation



Fiscal Year 2020 Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of

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Before the

Committee on Transportation and the Environment

Council of the District of Columbia

The Honorable Mary M. Cheh, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building

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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairperson Cheh and members of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment. My name is Everett Lott and I am the Interim Director of the District Department of Transportation, commonly referred to as DDOT. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser in today's hearing to discuss DDOT's performance in Fiscal Year 2020.

In 2020, DDOT was challenged to deliver on Mayor Bowser's commitment to health, prosperity, opportunity, and equity while moving people during a rapidly evolving public health emergency. In January of last year, Director Marootian talked about how being nimble and adapting to new ideas in the transportation industry were essential to achieving our goals in 2019. And that same flexibility empowered us to respond to the unique challenges of 2020.

2020 tested DDOT's ability to fulfill our responsibilities to each other and our responsibilities to the public. Nevertheless, our team of dedicated and resilient professionals met these challenges, head-on, and I appreciate the opportunity to highlight some of their successes today.

Equity in Planning

DDOT's mission is to *equitably* deliver a safe, sustainable, and reliable multimodal transportation network for all residents and visitors of the District. Last year, we recognized equity and inclusion as an imperative in planning and

executing the duties and responsibilities of our agency. We recognize that inequities in transportation policy exist, and these inequities have had disproportionately negative effects on the wellbeing of residents in underserved communities.

In 2020, we began updating MoveDC—the District’s long-range multimodal transportation plan—to identify policies and strategies to help advance our mobility, safety, and equity goals. We began this update by measuring the need for transportation improvements in communities across the District. Using this information, DDOT can identify historically under-resourced neighborhoods where transportation networks need investment and identify projects accordingly. A shared and just distribution of our investment’s safety, connectivity, and sustainability outcomes is a foundational principle for equity. Achieving this just distribution requires identifying and supporting our communities that are in the greatest need. We have an obligation to acknowledge and prevent discriminatory practices in policy making and will continue to be accessible and transparent while we work to build a reliable, affordable, and sustainable transportation system.

In 2020, DDOT diversified the ways we engage with our communities to reach residents in each Ward and of all backgrounds and capabilities. Prior to the public health emergency, DDOT hosted or planned open houses in each Ward—meeting residents where they are—to discuss projects in their neighborhoods,

receive their feedback, and listen to their concerns. Meeting residents where they are soon proved to be a challenge. Thanks to the efforts of our performance team over the past few years to upgrade our technological capabilities, DDOT was well-situated to quickly transition staff and operations to teleworking. When in-person engagements were paused, we moved our public meetings to videoconferencing platforms and made efforts to ensure that residents of different situations and capabilities could continue to engage with our agency. DDOT hosted tele-townhalls, attended over 200 virtual community meetings, and made sure to post recordings of DDOT presentations on our website.

Mobility and Sustainability

Realizing a safe, sustainable, and equitable transportation system requires not only big ideas for the future but also equitably delivering on existing expectations, like enhancing livability and keeping our public spaces in a state of good repair.

In 2020, our Urban Forestry Division continued to engage in a data driven campaign to identify neighborhoods in most need of new plantings to move the District closer to a full and thriving inventory of public trees. Last year UFD planted more than 8,400 new trees across the District—compared with 8,000 planted in 2019, concentrating its efforts in specific areas of Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. These neighborhoods represent priority areas for new tree plantings to ensure that

the District's canopy goals are met equitably. At the conclusion of the 2020 planting season, the total number of trees in the District grew to 167,000 and 97% of treeboxes were filled, the highest percentage in the agency's history.

DDOT closed a greater percentage of 311 requests than we did in 2019—especially those related to tree conditions, signage issues, road repairs, and sidewalk cracks. We remained committed to the goals of PaveDC and resurfaced 140 miles of local roads across the District—a 40% increase from the 100 miles resurfaced in FY2019. We completed 57 miles of sidewalk work, which includes: repairs, new installations and about 4,800 feet of gap closures. The number of structurally deficient bridges is the lowest it has been since Mayor Bowser took office. Perhaps most notable of our bridge projects, on August 13, 2020, we celebrated the completion of the six arches of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge.

Completing this project—the largest infrastructure project in the history of the agency—not only demonstrates DDOT's commitment to maintaining our assets in good condition but also represents our commitment to connecting the District's vibrant communities on each side of the Anacostia River. Expected to open this fall, this bridge will be a major step toward eliminating the barriers to benefiting from the District's economic prosperity—including those imposed by nature. The project entails not only constructing a bridge but also a mixed-use path and piers

that will enliven the gathering spaces on either side of the river. The arches represent a unique contribution to the Washington D.C. skyline and the connections made by the bridge will serve as a proper tribute to the legacy of Frederick Douglass.

Creating these safe spaces for people to travel and engage with each other is imperative to achieving our equity, mobility, and sustainability goals. In 2020, DDOT made significant investments to enhance and expand our transit networks to support current and future users of these systems.

DDOT remains committed to fulfilling our goal of installing 20 miles of bike lanes by 2022. Last year, our Active Transportation Branch constructed just over 6 miles of bike lanes (compared with the 5 miles in 2019), added 4.4 miles to the protected bike lane network (the most ever constructed in a single year), and piloted more than half a mile of Advisory Bike Lanes. Part of this effort included completing the Irving Street NW cycletrack, providing an east-west connection between the Brookland and Parkview neighborhoods.

In 2020, we added 19 new Capital Bikeshare stations, introduced 600 e-bikes to the system, and rolled out our new CaBi for All program. This new program is designed to provide CaBi memberships at a reduced cost to individuals who qualify for certain state or federal assistance programs. In its first year, we enrolled nearly 2,000 new bikeshare members who took over 65,000 trips. Though

the public health emergency prevented us from engaging with the residents about this opportunity in-person, our ultimate goal is to make outreach to people directly and partner with qualifying service providers to inform recipients of their eligibility for the program.

In 2020, DDOT built upon the momentum of 2019 and continued to focus heavily on expanding the District's public transit. At the direction of Mayor Bowser, DDOT added car-free lanes to our bus priority network along three corridors: 14th Street NW, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE, and M Street SE. These car-free lanes are designed to improve the efficiency of Metrobus and Circulator operations, to reduce passenger crowding at bus stops, and maintain a safe distance on buses. In 2021, we will continue to examine ways in which we can optimize the performance of car-free lanes and use lessons learned to identify additional corridors to improve bus service.

Response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the ways in which we use our public spaces and transportation systems. We were challenged to explore innovative ways to meet the need of our communities while advancing our accessibility and connectivity goals. Diversifying and innovating the District's mobility options is key to addressing the challenge of moving people during a public health emergency.

DDOT sought ways to afford residents the necessary space to safely travel in the public right-of-way while maintaining a comfortable distance from others. This requires not just changes to the built environment but also policy changes to how we use public spaces. Soon after the declaration of a public health emergency, DDOT temporarily expanded sidewalks at ten locations around grocery stores and other essential businesses. We lowered the default speed limit to 20 miles-per-hour on local roads and further reduced speed limits to 15 miles-per-hour around health care facilities and COVID-19 testing sites. Each of these changes to policy and the physical environment is designed to keep people safe while engaging in essential activities.

We explored new ideas to safely and quickly create more spaces for more people. We heard ideas from the members of the public, ANCs, the Council, and transportation advisory councils about how to reimagine our public spaces to support neighborhood-based, safe social distancing. In June of 2020, we announced the first five miles of Slow Streets in the District. Slow Streets are residential streets restricted to local vehicle traffic. Now totaling nearly 27 miles, Slow Streets are designed to complement the existing transit network and provide “first-mile/last-mile” connections for residents traveling to and from essential businesses.

Supporting communities also means supporting our local businesses stressed by the challenges of the pandemic. As businesses and restaurants transferred their operations outdoors and adapted to predominantly take-out service, DDOT found ways to repurpose public space to ease the transition.

DDOT added 129 pickup-dropoff zones, also known as “PUDOS,” across the District to make curbsides accessible to restaurants and delivery services. At the direction of Mayor Bowser and in partnership with our sister agencies, we began issuing “streatery” permits, which allows for dining outdoors to supplement a restaurant’s reduced capacity. Thanks to the additional staff and budgetary support from this committee, DDOT was able to quickly issue almost 300 outdoor dining permits before the end of 2020. These efforts have been helpful in supporting our local business. 86% of restaurants reported an increase in revenue by an average of 30% and about 80% said they were able to retain, rehire, or expand their staff thanks to the additional seating.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated finding innovative solutions to create safe spaces for people to walk, bike, and engage in other activities in the public right-of-way. We continue to welcome input from residents on these programs and search for ways to provide further benefits to our communities.

Vision Zero

The pandemic has also challenged our progress toward realizing the goals of Vision Zero and tested our systems in unexpected ways. Despite this challenge, DDOT remains dedicated to eliminating traffic fatalities because even one life lost on our roadways is one too many. We will continue to do the work necessary to create the safest possible transportation system for residents and visitors alike.

As residents and commuters stayed at home and out of their cars, DDOT was able to make significant enhancements to pedestrian safety—especially around schools and traffic circles—and move quickly on large and small safety improvement projects across the District. We implemented safety improvements at 16th Street and Chevy Chase Circles, reconfigured the intersection of 4th, Blair, and Cedar NW, and diversified mobility options on New Jersey Avenue NW by adding a protected bike lane and permitting two-way traffic. We enhanced traffic signal operations at 32 intersections to improve pedestrian safety, and we implemented 23 livability study safety recommendations. Through our Safe Routes to Schools program, DDOT assessed 97 schools for short- and medium-term safety improvements, constructed speed humps around 17 schools, and posted Speed Limit Flashers at six schools.

DDOT appreciates the Council's support for our efforts to quickly implement traffic calming measures through temporary materials or quick-build projects. Data suggest that the improvements DDOT has made to our roadways

over the past few years have been effective. An analysis done by the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety found that, in the District, “hardening” left turns significantly lowered the speed of turning vehicles and reduced conflicts between cars and pedestrians by 70%. As these simple installations can be an effective tool to reduce risks for the most vulnerable users, we will continue to identify intersections where we can deploy these and other improvements to make the roadway safer.

The unique challenge brought on by the pandemic is that fewer vehicles on the road has resulted in higher speeds among those remaining. Across the country, vehicle speeds have increased by 22%. The District, unfortunately, is no exception to this trend. And while, in 2020, the District witnessed 30% fewer crashes than in 2019, the increased speeds have increased the severity of these crashes. While we work to build a road network that fosters safe driving habits, we recognize that speeding is a contributing factor to fatalities on our roadways. In turn, we are undertaking a campaign to educate users on the importance of driving at safe speeds.

Achieving the goals of Vision Zero requires a conscious effort from all users and stewards of public space. DDOT has complemented our changes to policy and our built environment with public service announcements. Messages like “20 is Plenty” and “this is not an invitation to speed,” imploring drivers to

slow down, have appeared on bus shelters, billboards, radio, television, and social media.

Everything DDOT does is done with safety as the first priority. Major streetscape projects advanced in 2020—like the revitalization of MLK Jr. Avenue and redesigning the intersection of Florida and New York Avenues—are expected to have significant safety benefits for all users. And our more noticeable efforts to repurpose public spaces for people—like Slow Streets and the streateries program—serve as visual reminders to all of us that we must share our public spaces. In 2021 DDOT will continue our efforts to provide a safer transportation system while also encouraging users to consider how we can each use these systems safely.

Conclusion

DDOT employed innovative ideas to meet the challenges of 2020 and create safe spaces for people. Believe it or not, FY2020 began with our first-ever Open Streets event on Georgia Avenue. Introducing new and different ways to use public spaces gives us an idea of how our streets can look when we depend less on vehicles, and use more sustainable, active modes of transportation. The District remains a leader in this area. In June of 2020, Mayor Bowser and the Council—with help from our sign shop and DPW’s MuralsDC program—designated two blocks of 16th Street NW as “Black Lives Matter Plaza.” This plaza is a place not

just for pedestrians but also a representation of the District's commitment to equity and justice. Since then, cities, large and small, across the country have repurposed their public spaces in solidarity with this commitment.

In 2021, DDOT will continue to prioritize people when moving toward our equity, mobility, and sustainability goals. Our team looks forward to applying the lessons learned in 2020 to find safe and innovative ways to respond to new challenges as we reemerge from the public health emergency. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the work we've done, and I look forward to answering any questions.