

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
*District Department of Transportation*



Public Roundtable:

The Surge in Traffic Crashes, Fatalities, and Injuries in the District and the Urgent  
Need to Fully Fund the Vision Zero Enhancement Omnibus Amendment Act

Testimony of  
Everett Lott  
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Before the  
Committee on Transportation and the Environment

Council of the District of Columbia

Thursday, May 13, 2021  
12:00 p.m.  
Room 500  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004



Good afternoon, Chairperson Cheh and members of the Committee. My name is Everett Lott, Acting Director of the District Department of Transportation or “DDOT.” I am pleased to be joined by Assistant Chief Carroll from the Metropolitan Police Department, our close partners in Vision Zero. We are testifying today on behalf of Mayor Bowser’s Administration about the status and progress toward the District’s Vision Zero Initiative. We welcome this roundtable as an opportunity to discuss openly and honestly with the Council and the public about our progress and challenges towards realizing the goals of Vision Zero. In 2015, Mayor Bowser announced a bold goal: that the District will eliminate fatalities and critical injuries to travelers of our transportation system.

To work toward this goal, Mayor Bowser put in motion a cross-disciplinary, multi-agency initiative known as Vision Zero, an initiative that has been used in cities around the world to convey the principle that traffic fatalities are preventable and that everyone has the right to move safely in their communities. The Vision Zero framework recognizes that while mistakes on our roadways are inevitable, those mistakes need not result in death or critical injury. As a government, and as a community, we must take responsibility for improving our streets, our traffic management policies, and other related systems to lessen the severity of crashes.



## **Troubling Circumstances**

The context in which this roundtable takes place cannot go without mention. Over the course of 2020, and into the first quarter of 2021, all of us who take the Vision Zero commitment seriously and work every day to make our streets safer have faced some humbling challenges. This year has been especially daunting. Juanita McDowney, Marion Dante Fields, Sean Burgess, Troy Mason, Lee Arthur Perry-Davis, Armando Martinez-Ramos, Jose Sotelo, Desrick Cooks, Zy'aire Joshua, Evelyn Troyah, Brian Johnson, Jim Pagels, James Turner, Waldon Adams, Rhonda Whitaker and Edgar Delcid each lost their lives on our roadways.

One of these crashes struck particularly close to home for DDOT. On April 24, Rhonda Whitaker and her friend Waldon Adams were struck by a motorist and killed while taking a stroll on Hains Point. It has been widely reported that Rhonda and Waldon were caring individuals who spent a great deal of time advocating for residents of the District who experienced homelessness. What you might not have heard is that Rhonda was also a member of our DDOT family—since 2018, Rhonda had served as a school crossing guard for our agency. We grieve for her, as we grieve for all of those who have lost their lives in these crashes.

We share the concern and frustration that members of the community have expressed about safety; that same passion is what keeps DDOT's staff committed to doing what is needed to make our streets safer. I want to be clear that when we



say that safety is our top priority, we mean it. Our focus, today, is to overcome new challenges brought on by the changing demand on our roadways.

## **Nation-wide Challenge**

Unfortunately, our experience over the past year is not unique to the District. Across the country, roadway fatalities increased by eight percent (8%) in 2020 despite total miles driven in the US dropping by about thirteen percent (13%). Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration suggest that speeding is the main factor driving this increase.<sup>1</sup> Last spring, when stay-at-home orders went into effect, many employees, who may have otherwise been driving, migrated to teleworking. This meant fewer cars were on our roads, which resulted in reduced congestion. Reduced congestion means a lot more lane space, and a lot more lane space invites reckless behavior like speeding.

Data in the District reflect this nation-wide trend. By April and May of 2020, traffic volumes dropped to about forty percent (40%) of their pre-pandemic levels and speeding increased.<sup>2</sup> Average rush hour speeds in and around downtown nearly doubled.<sup>3</sup> Automated traffic enforcement cameras have issued fewer

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<sup>1</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-us-news-traffic-coronavirus-pandemic-307ab70e3336288bf38df73e9dba348e>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/traffic-deaths-coronavirus/2021/02/11/cc411e50-6707-11eb-886d-5264d4ceb46d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/traffic-deaths-coronavirus/2021/02/11/cc411e50-6707-11eb-886d-5264d4ceb46d_story.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/covid-traffic-congestion/2021/03/08/92fcd2e8-8029-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/covid-traffic-congestion/2021/03/08/92fcd2e8-8029-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html)



speeding citations during the public health emergency than in 2019, but the total fines are higher due to an increase in the proportion of citations issued for driving at the highest speeds. And although the District witnessed about thirty percent (30%) fewer crashes in 2020, many of the crashes were more severe, with excessive speeding being a contributing factor in many cases. The result has been a greater number of fatalities.

### **Incident Response**

Any time a crash results in a death or critical injury, we must ask ourselves what changes we can put in place to make such tragedies less likely to occur in the future. In the immediate aftermath, DDOT visits the site with the Metropolitan Police Department and meets internally to discuss what improvements can be made immediately while we evaluate a more long-term solution. In many cases we restripe roadway markings, upgrade existing signage, and adjust signal phasing to decrease traffic conflicts. Examples of this include the intersections of Firth Sterling at South Capitol and Martin Luther King Jr at Malcolm X. If a location is part of an upcoming capital project, as were the crashes on Kennedy Street and on Alabama Avenue, DDOT will expedite the installation of the capital project's traffic safety improvements if possible.

Just yesterday, Mayor Bowser announced a reprogramming of funds that would enhance DDOT's capacity to respond and implement immediate



improvements to locations where a fatality has occurred. With these additional resources, DDOT will be able to install driver feedback signs alerting drivers of their speed versus the actual speed limit, rectangular rapid flashing beacons enhancing the visibility of pedestrians crossing a street, and additional automated traffic enforcement cameras along corridors where excessive speeding is a persistent problem. Although these rapid-response measures can often help to address immediate issues, we cannot allow ourselves to constantly be in “reaction mode,” trying to retroactively fix the location of the most recent crash.

### **Preventative Action**

Achieving the goal of zero deaths and critical injuries requires us to be strategic, forward-looking, and proactive in how we approach all aspects of the Vision Zero initiative, from planning, engineering, and project implementation, to enforcement and education, community engagement. The challenges of 2020 persist in these early months of 2021; the District’s traffic volumes are still just seventy percent (70%) of their pre-pandemic level, which continues to invite reckless behavior. Our approach is not to just wait for increased vehicle traffic to return but to design streets to accommodate and encourage more sustainable modes of transportation and make our streets safer for all users.

Mayor Bowser’s recent commitment also includes over five million dollars (\$5.2M) to implement safety improvements and traffic calming measures across



the District beginning this summer and to be completed before the end of the calendar year. This investment will help expedite not only improved roadway striping and new signage but also the installation of curb extensions, medians, and other channeling devices to deconflict traffic and mitigate aggressive speeding. These planned improvements originated from recent livability studies and, therefore, have already gone through a public process. What remains is to implement the solutions that have been identified, and we will now be able to do so.

We remain committed to our mission to equitably deliver a safe, sustainable, and reliable multimodal transportation network for all residents and visitors of the District. We are working to make the improvements necessary to our built environment to reflect this commitment and our commitment to the goal of Vision Zero. DDOT currently has a substantial number of capital projects actively under construction each designed to enhance the safety of all users of the roadway. The Maryland Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue West road diets will reduce vehicle travel lanes, return slip lanes to pedestrians, bump out sidewalks to shorten crossing distances, and fill crucial missing links in our bicycle network.

This work has continued apace during the public health emergency, despite the many other novel challenges of the last year. In 2020 DDOT made appreciable progress on the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge which will not only provide a



new landmark for the District but will also contribute significantly to our bike and pedestrian networks and make major improvements to intersections and interchanges on both sides of the Anacostia river. We remain committed to building twenty (20) miles of protected bike lanes by 2022. Last year, was a record year for the delivery of protected bicycle lanes, which provide safety benefits not just to cyclists, but to all users of the roadway. The work we do at DDOT is proactive, strategic, and larger scale in nature, and is foundational to achieving the Mayor's Vision Zero priorities. Designs that afford more space for people and mitigate reckless behavior, like speeding, better reflect the District's priorities for our built environment.

## **Moving Forward**

We understand that the goals of Vision Zero often require more immediate action than can be delivered through capital projects. Therefore, we have also committed to making internal structural changes to the traffic safety assessment (TSA) process to more quickly and efficiently deliver safety improvements. First, we want to move quick interventions out of the TSA process. Some challenges can be mitigated with quick-build traffic control devices that do not require the evaluation that accompanies a TSA request. In those cases, we want to act quickly. We also plan to triage TSA requests based on when and why the problems are generated, and move more quickly on those requests that may not needed extended





data collection periods. Finally, we are working toward separating the TSA process from the 311 system because we believe that requests for traffic safety assessments are best addressed by working directly with the community and we want to foster that direct line of communication. Our intent behind these changes is to give ourselves the flexibility to act now while we evaluate more permanent solutions.

There is always room to grow and DDOT is always open and willing to explore new ideas to make our roadways safer. We are currently having active discussions in several neighborhoods on some substantial projects that better reflect these priorities and would enhance safety of all users of the roadway. The proposed Southern Avenue streetscape redesign includes new centerline medians, narrowing travel lanes and providing a refuge for pedestrians, wider sidewalks, and bike lanes. On East Capitol Street, DDOT is proposing to reconfigure the challenging intersections with Benning Road and Central Avenue, extend curbs to shorten crossing distances, install floating bus stops, and add bicycle lanes. . We are also soliciting feedback from the community on our proposed safety enhancements to Wheeler Road SE, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, Connecticut Avenue, and Massachusetts Avenue.

We need to think deeply about how to make our work in this area equitable. We must acknowledge, as we have said in our DDOT Equity Statement, that deep-rooted structural injustices and inequities have contributed to the disparate access



to safe, affordable, and efficient transportation that provides access to economic opportunities, housing, and services for communities across the District. We must also acknowledge that these inequities have disproportionately and negatively impacted environmental and health outcomes in our underserved communities. Safety outcomes are no exception. Some of our most dangerous corridors exist in locations where, for many decades, the District and the federal government prioritized moving automobile traffic as quickly as possible. We need to ensure that those neighborhoods and corridors, as well as their residents, receive our utmost care and attention.

Safety is the number one priority in everything we do. From tree pruning, to paving, to streetscape redesign, everything we do is done to improve the safety of those driving, biking, walking, and rolling in our public spaces. 2020 and 2021 have presented new challenges to our efforts. While we know that the challenges are substantial, we remain committed to our goal of eliminating deaths and critical injuries and making our roadways safer for everyone.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify and reaffirm DDOT's commitment to Vision Zero and look forward to answering any questions you may have.

