

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Department of Transportation



Metro For DC Amendment Act of 2021

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

Room 500

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12 P.M.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairperson Cheh, members of the committee, staff, and District residents. My name is Sharon Kershbaum. I am the Deputy Director at the District Department of Transportation, commonly referred to as DDOT. I am here today to testify on Bill B24-0429—the Metro for D.C. Amendment Act of 2021.

I will start my testimony by stating DDOT’s support for the intent of the proposed legislation to elevate access and equity and bolster our transit system, particularly as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will then share some of our existing efforts toward providing accessible and equitable transit service to all District residents. Finally, I will outline DDOT’s concerns with the proposed design of the program, such as the scope of eligibility determination, the administrative costs, and the equity fund limitations.

GOAL ALIGNMENT

A primary component of DDOT’s mission is to provide safe, accessible and equitable transit service to all District residents. We recognize that Transit

Benefits and Reduced Fare Programs can enhance access to bus and rail services, particularly when oriented toward historically under-resourced communities.

Additionally, reducing cost-related barriers to transit both enhances community livability and economic sustainability and encourages mode shift away from single-occupancy vehicles.

We see value in how the proposed legislation aims to further mobility by eliminating cost-related barriers to transit and boosts our transit system during this critical period as we work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of these principles are core to our Multimodal Long-Range Transportation Plan, *moveDC*, which features mobility among its seven overarching goals. DDOT is undertaking many initiatives that align with the intent of this legislation, specifically to encourage ridership and advance transportation access and equity and ensure public investments in transportation justly benefit all District residents.

Kids Ride Free Program

The first of these initiatives is the Kids Ride Free program, established and championed by Mayor Bowser in 2013 to ensure that enrolled District students

who are also District residents can get to school and school-related activities for free. In 2019, 50,000 students participated in the program. Although participation in the program was significantly reduced due to COVID-19 in 2020-2021, the Kids Ride Free program remains a critical tool in our mobility efforts.

Adult Learner Transit Benefit Programs

In addition, the Adult Learner Transit Subsidy program provides eligible adult learners with a \$70 monthly transit benefit that can be used on Metrorail, Metro bus, and the DC Circulator bus anywhere within the District of Columbia. Under both Kids Ride Free and Adult Learner programs, schools and other approved education providers enroll students in the program.

Bus Priority Program

We are also significantly ramping up our Bus Priority Program under the leadership of Mayor Bowser. In December 2021, we released the Bus Priority Plan, DDOT's vision for bus priority, with an ambitious project pipeline to deliver up to 51 bus priority projects District-wide. This plan seeks to improve the entire rider experience through several strategies including dedicated bus lanes to reduce congestion delay, transit signal priority to address delay at intersections,

and bus stop accessibility. Our investments in Bus Priority would improve on-time bus performance, leading to faster, more reliable service that allows access to destinations that were previously too far to reach by transit.

K Street Transitway

K Street Transitway is another example of our commitment to improve bus travel time and reliability in the District and ultimately boost our transit system with increased ridership. Dedicated middle lanes on K Street would improve bus travel times for tens of thousands of riders.

Coordination with Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA)

Importantly, our staff coordinates regularly with WMATA to ensure District-wide and regional rail and bus service plans meet the needs of all residents; particularly those in historically under-resourced communities within areas of transportation need. Prior to the pandemic, DDOT worked with WMATA through the Bus State of Good Operations initiative to improve bus service in the District. DDOT also coordinates with WMATA staff and DC Metro Board members regularly to ensure Board policies align with DDOT's goals and mission. Last year, our staff and DC Metro Board members worked diligently with neighboring jurisdictions and

WMATA to implement a free transfer policy initiative that offered a \$2 discount for rail-to-bus transfers.

The New Circulator Route in Ward 7

Our plan to add a new Circulator Route in Ward 7 will improve transit equity and access for a historically under-served community. Starting in 2023, the new fourteen-and-a-half-mile Circulator route in Ward 7 will provide an essential east/west connection between Ward 6 and 7, serving Deanwood, Benning Road, Stadium Armory, and Union Station Metrorail stations.

Low-Income Fare Trial

Last, but not least, in partnership with the Lab@DC, we are currently studying the impacts of transit discounts on low-income riders. The Low-Income Fare Trial is a nine-month pilot run by the Lab@DC that partners with an existing utility assistance program to provide three different levels of transit discounts to 4,000 residents. The pilot will begin in early spring 2022 and will conclude in 2023. The Lab will use existing data to measure how the discounts affect the number and type of trips participants take on transit as well as more general economic well-

being. Once the study is concluded, DDOT will be better understand the impact of means-tested subsidies on transit access and mobility.

Other Strategies

In addition to the initiatives we have implemented, there are a number of strategies that other cities are pursuing to make transit more accessible, such as fare-free transit system-wide or on targeted routes. In February 2020, Kansas City, Missouri, became the first major U.S. City to offer free bus service. Our neighboring jurisdiction, the City of Alexandria, started fare-free service on all DASH buses in September 2021. Most recently, the City of Boston announced a two-year fare-free policy on three of its heavy-haul bus routes as a measure to boost economic recovery and remove barriers to access for residents. And here in the District we have in the past promoted Free Circulator for residents and visitors in the District.

CONCERNS WITH THE BILL AS WRITTEN

We appreciate Council's shared support for affordable, accessible, and reliable transit service for District residents. While we support the intent of the proposed

legislation, we do have concerns with certain aspects of the Metro for DC Amendment Act of 2021. I will outline these now, with the intent that we can work with Council in the coming months to address the implementation challenges within the envisioned program design.

Eligibility Determination

Our first concern surrounds the bill's eligibility determination framework. Having spent over six years as the Chief Operating Officer at the Department of Human Services, I am very familiar with the complexity involved in public benefit eligibility determination. Even with the flexibility of outsourcing this activity to non-profit organizations, the design and oversight of a program that includes income verification, residency verification, and verification to exclude residents participating in other transit subsidy programs are complex and far outside DDOT's mission and expertise.

Although the proposed program is not intended to be a means-based initiative, it invariably requires a review and approval that involves discretion and cannot be "automated." The tiered prioritization and variable eligibility terms—fluctuating annually based on available budget—creates an even bigger implementation

challenge in terms of designing an IT system, staff training, and marketing to the public.

Administration Resources

We are also concerned about the resources that will be required to administer a program of this magnitude. The proposed program design will require a significant number of FTEs to administer including eligibility determination, customer service for inquiries and troubleshooting, coordination with WMATA's SmartBenefits Program, grants and contracts management, program compliance monitoring, and IT system development and maintenance.

The IT system alone would require a considerable investment, because it would have to both allow end users to apply on-line as well as capture verifications and determination decisions. This system design would be particularly costly and complex to accommodate the eligibility prioritization framework and shifting eligibility requirements depending on available funds.

Other costs that we foresee include a physical site to provide resident application support and customer service. Historically, at the Department of Human Services, even though all benefit application processes are available online, approximately

40% of DHS’s customers continue to apply for services, in-person, at one of the DHS service centers. Accordingly, DDOT would need to be prepared to meet the demand for an in-person service option. These are only the more obvious cost drivers - launching a new benefit program with this design will likely have other administrative costs that become more clear during program planning and implementation.

Subsidy Cost

While the Office of Chief Financial Officer will determine the cost of the program, DDOT has performed some preliminary calculations to estimate the potential program cost. Even if we limited this transit benefit to SNAP-eligible residents (*i.e.*, those who are capped at 100% of Federal Poverty Level) and assume that each participant spends \$50/month (*half* of the allotted \$100), the annual cost of the program subsidy would be \$50 million. The cost will significantly increase if we include population at the income thresholds recommended in the bill (starting at 300% of FPL).

Transit Equity Fund Limitations

In terms of the Transit Equity Fund, restricting the scope of these resources to WMATA “non-regional” service only is an additional concern. A cost-effective

expansion of bus services that benefits District residents should not exclude regional routes, as District residents ride WMATA “regional” routes in large numbers. The purpose of the Fund should be to improve bus service where it benefits as many riders in historically underserved communities as possible, not based on how Metrobus service is paid or by whom. While the process for making service changes on regional routes is more complicated, we think demand data should drive which routes receive enhanced service, and those will very likely be on the regional routes.

We at DDOT are excited about recent targeted investments we have made to address transit equity and access under the leadership of Mayor Bowser; and while the idea of additional funding may be alluring, we believe our current mix of strategies will effectively address the goals of transit equity and accessibility.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we support the intent of the proposed legislation to improve access and equity and bolster our transit system. We look forward to working with the

Council to develop an approach that could provide an even more efficient program to remove barriers to transit for District residents who need it most.

I appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on this important issue, and I thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. I am available to answer any questions that you may have.