

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

District Department of Transportation



Public Roundtable on
Transportation in the District after the Pandemic

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Transportation and the Environment
The Honorable Mary Cheh, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

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John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Good morning, Chairperson Cheh, members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Everett Lott, Interim-Director of the District Department of Transportation. I am here today to present testimony on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser on DDOT's vision for transportation in the District in the aftermath of the public health emergency.

Over the course of 2020 and in response to the public health emergency, DDOT took steps to reimagine how we use our public spaces to prioritize people and improve our existing transportation systems. These ideas included making streets available for outdoor recreation, repurposing curbsides for restaurant seating, and adding car-free lanes to improve bus operations. DDOT remains committed to delivering a safe, sustainable, and equitable transportation network for all residents, as we reemerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. We will continue to work toward maximizing the performance of our existing transportation system supporting ideas that worked, and reevaluating how some of these newer programs can better advance our safety, equity, and mobility goals.

Enhancing bus infrastructure is imperative to meeting our transportation goals for the future. Public transportation suffered unprecedented ridership declines in 2020, due to the pandemic. However, bus ridership declined to a much lesser extent than Metrorail. This tells us that the District's essential workforce—who could not afford to stay home—rely heavily on buses for essential travel.

Therefore, DDOT intends to continue the deep cleaning regimen of our Circulator fleet, expand our network of car-free lanes, and look for ways to optimize their performance. One of the biggest challenges to the safety and effectiveness of bus lanes has been motorists' non-compliance with the lane restrictions. Having to navigate around an obstruction creates an unsafe and inefficient environment for all users of the roadway. As such, we will continue to explore ways to improve the performance of our bus priority program. Ensuring that buses remain a safe, reliable and attractive form of public transportation is important to let commuters know that there are alternatives to single-occupancy-vehicle trips in the District as we emerge from the pandemic.

DDOT continues to support finding ways to safely reimagine public spaces for people, recreation, and active forms of transportation. We are evaluating the successes and challenges of programs piloted during the public health emergency to develop a long-term strategy for realizing this goal. Supporters and critics of the Slow Streets program have both expressed that they like the program, as envisioned, but that vision is often disparate from the reality. Compliance with the regulations of the Slow Streets program is reportedly low, leaving pedestrians and others feeling unsafe while using the roadway. This disconnect between perceived safety and actual safety is not sustainable. Therefore, DDOT has made the determination that the Slow Streets program as it currently exists will remain in

effect until the end of May. We are committed to reviewing the lessons learned from this experiment, conceived and implemented on very quick turn-around during the emergency, as we seek a permanent and more effective strategy to safely create spaces for people.

The closure of Beach Drive to vehicle traffic has been a successful example of repurposing public spaces for the benefit of people. Thus, DDOT is ready and eager to work with National Park Service on the future of this thoroughfare. If Beach Drive were to continue to be closed to vehicle traffic, affording more space for people, DDOT is prepared to provide the necessary support and expertise to facilitate that decision.

Between 2016 and 2019, when access to Beach Drive was restricted for its rehabilitation, DDOT monitored the effects that the partial closure had on the alternative routes in surrounding neighborhoods. This data was subsequently applied to the study of the reversible lanes on Connecticut Avenue and proposal to add a bus lane on 16th Street. We are familiar with what transpires when Beach Drive is closed, so in the event that the road continues to be reserved for pedestrians and active forms of transportation, we are confident that we will be prepared to make adjustments—if necessary—to accommodate changing demands to our road network as a result.

We look to build on the success of our programs in 2020 that made space for people and supported our local businesses. During the public health emergency, the demand for outdoor dining options and delivery services grew as more people stayed at home and refrained from gathering indoors. In line with Mayor Bowser's Reopen Washington DC Act of 2021, DDOT commits to supporting streateries over the next three years and making temporary pickup and dropoff (PUDO) zones permanent. The streateries program has been tremendously popular; 89% restaurants have registered support for making the program permanent and 70% customers have preferred dining outdoors and felt safe doing so. The new PUDO zones have allowed restaurants—that do not typically offer takeout service—to do so as demand for eating at home grows. As we craft a more permanent framework for these programs, we may choose to relocate or consolidate PUDOs and streateries to maximize their efficiency. DDOT supports the streateries program and PUDO zones because they are innovative and successful ways of meeting this new demand for dining opportunities and creating spaces for people.

As we emerge from the public health emergency, DDOT remains committed to supporting our public transit systems and the new programs that successfully meet the new demands imposed on our public spaces. Much about how people will commute and travel in the aftermath of the pandemic remains uncertain. As such, our goal is to elevate our existing transportation systems to provide residents and

visitors an array of viable transit options to navigate the District. This includes not only expanding our bus-priority program—to grow ridership beyond levels in 2019—but also continuing towards our other mobility goals, like installing 20 miles of protected bike lanes by 2022. During the public health emergency, we constructed more protected bike lanes than we had ever before, reintroduced e-bikes into the Capital Bikeshare system, and enrolled new members through our CaBi for All program. Like buses, we want to ensure that cycling and other active forms of transportation are a safe and viable means of navigating the District for the aftermath of the pandemic.

What is clear is that District residents and businesses enjoy the spaces made available to them over the course of 2020. The streateries program is a popular and successful example of reclaiming roadways for people and DDOT is prepared to make the changes necessary to sustain this program for the future. Our intent is to prioritize people when planning for the future, post-pandemic, and continue to explore innovative and creative ways to advance our equity, sustainability, and mobility goals.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to any questions you may have.