

Testimony to the Council of DC Committee on Transportation and the Environment March 23, 2021, Roundtable on Transportation in the District After the Pandemic

Nearly one year ago, DC Families for Safe Streets wrote a letter to Mayor Bowser, then-Director Marootian, and this Council saying, “The reduction in vehicular traffic stemming from the [pandemic and Stay At Home] Order offers a valuable opportunity for the District to temporarily reapportion street space to more effectively provide for social distancing. At the same time, fewer cars on the roads invites speeding, the leading factor in injurious and deadly crashes.”¹

Frankly, the District failed to take that opportunity. DC made many fewer changes than advocates suggested, and the few that were made were made so slowly and piecemeal as to be completely ineffective, and it shows. 2020 tied 2018 as DC’s worst for traffic violence in the last dozen years, resuming a five-year trend of rising traffic fatality rates,² and this year we are on pace to match it. We have already lost eight people this year, including four who were killed while walking,³ and it’s not even April.

The media is full of reports of people who are concerned about the prospect of returning to public transit, even as vaccination rates rise and the pandemic abates. Rather than foolishly cutting back on train and especially bus service, we should offer *more* of it, and we should build more bus lanes—and operate them all day, every day, not just in “peak” directions at “peak” hours. Similarly, we need to build more bike lanes, more rapidly, and we need to expand sidewalks and safe places to walk, too. By making more and better space dedicated to transit, walking, and riding bikes and other devices free of cars, people still wary of sharing space with others can space out better and still get to work safely.

Because despite the widely-reported rise in working from home, tens if not hundreds of thousands of people still need to get to work in the District. Slow streets and opening Beach Drive to non-drivers are important, but, while we do need to create space for people to get outside recreationally safely, even after the pandemic, I am frankly more concerned about DC’s medical and pharmacy staffs, security guards, cleaners, and all the other in-person employees who walk and bike and take transit to work. People like my partner and the hundreds of others who work at DC’s grocery stores, keeping those working from home fed.

Great numbers of those so-called “essential workers” the District depends on don’t own cars—over one third of DC residents are without access to a car,⁴ and the number is even higher in central and lower-income areas—while nearly 80% of Ward 3 and 4 households

¹ “Successful Social Distancing Requires Safe Routes for People to Essential Services and Recreation”, <https://dcfamiliesforsafestreets.org/?p=447>

² MPD, “20-year Traffic Fatality Trend”, <https://mpdc.dc.gov/node/208742>

³ DC Families for Safe Streets Vision Zero Clock, <https://dcfamiliesforsafestreets.org/vision-zero-clock/>

⁴ DC Health Matters Community Dashboard, “Households without a Vehicle”, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=281&localeId=130951>

own a car, here in Adams Morgan, 45.6% of households do not, and in parts of Ward 8 over 60% of households have no vehicle.⁵

Of course DC is only one partner in the largest of our local transit providers, but in addition to fighting to fund and preserve Metro's critical bus routes and building more bus lanes, faster, DC can and must do more to expand Circulator and the Streetcar and fill in the gaps where Metro service is missing.

DC's slowly-rolled out changes to street space, and their tepid support from the Wilson Building, may mean that we lost the ability to pilot concepts over the last year that would have improved people's lives in the short term. But even as the pandemic abates, we can still make changes for the long-term.

The desperate need to stem climate change, and protect our environment generally, demands that we not simply give in and return to the car-centric mobility of the recent past. The fact that bike shops have been utterly unable to keep either bikes or parts in stock for most of a year—and that, nearly a year into this, my friends at BikeMatchDC⁶ are still placing every bike they can get their hands on, as soon as they can get their hands on it—shows that there is still significant demand for the ability to get around our city and region without a car. When Rachel Maisler noted this during BAC's oversight hearing last month, the Chair's response was to ask how to keep those folks riding. As Maisler said, the answer is simple: "Give us more safe places to ride. . . whatever it takes."⁷

We need more, wider, and more connected sidewalks and bike lanes, all across the District, and we need DDOT to be less timid about proposing and pushing for them. As advocates from elsewhere have suggested recently,⁸ a good rule should be "1 of each before 2 of any"—that is, before any road gets a second lane, it should have a bus lane or bike lanes—or, conversely, we should be looking at any road that already has multiple lanes in each direction and make one into a bus lane or space for people walking and cycling, with bike lanes and wider sidewalks.

DC streets have been built to the traffic expectations of full employment of people who drive from suburbs to central business districts, but if, as we keep hearing, many of the office workers who used to drive to work will continue to work from home, the streets will remain wide open—which we know impels drivers to greater, more dangerous speeds. Those who do drive should be able to drive safely, without the daily anxiety of being hit by an out-of-control driver moving at highway speed through city streets, and those who don't should have space to travel safely, no matter their chosen mode.

⁵ DC Health Matters Community Dashboard, *above*; Urban Institute Greater DC Data Explorer, "% Households with a Car" by Ward, <https://greaterdc.urban.org/data-explorer?geography=wd12&indicator=PctHshldCar&topic=connection&year=2014-18>

⁶ <http://wonkpolicy.com/bikematchdc/>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1365363568154193922>

⁸ Such as <https://twitter.com/jehiah/status/1373996419573547009/>