



## WASHINGTON AREA BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

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October 14, 2016

Councilmember McDuffie, Chairperson  
Committee on the Judiciary  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Suite 5  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Councilmember McDuffie and members of the Committee on the Judiciary:

On behalf of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (“WABA”), thank you for looking into the complex challenges and failures of our city’s dispatch services. Our 911 system needs upgrades and improvements to be a service that District citizens can rely on anywhere in the city they find themselves in need of emergency assistance.

The current 911 system is a non-dynamic search system utilizing a finite list of pre-approved locations. Thus, the 911 dispatchers and address software work well in the context of an urban street grid, because the protocol and system are built upon the assumption that the caller is at a discrete address. But stray from a discrete address— whether on a freeway, large park, or trail— and problems arise.

When a driver in Rock Creek Park had a challenging time communicating her location to dispatch earlier this year, resulting in a six minute delay, it made news.<sup>1</sup> We have consistently encountered similar difficulties in communicating location to be a problem throughout the city’s trail network. We are aware of at least six such incidents since 2015.

Only one mile of the Metropolitan Branch Trail (“MBT”) has mile marker signs to address this particular issue. The MBT signs are labeled and in the 911 address system. But communicating the trail location— even with the mile markers— continues to be a problem, resulting in a failure of address for a caller on Sept 14th 2016.<sup>2</sup> The Office of Unified Communications (“OUC”) has done training since then, but the call speaks to a wider problem: trails are not well integrated into the city address network.

For example, in Computer Aided Dispatch (“CAD”), operators must enter “Trail - Anacostia River Trail” to get address points for the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail. If a dispatcher enters simply “Anacostia”, the locations will not come up, because the software searches left to right. Similarly, there are 55 results in CAD for the search “Trail - Metropolitan Branch Trail”, and 25 results for “Metropolitan Branch Trail”. Not all 25 of the “Metropolitan Branch Trail” results are listed in the 55 for “Trail -”; the intersection of the MBT with Rhode Island Avenue— a known crime hotspot— does not show up in either of these searches. In 911 conversations, when seconds and minutes matter, there is not time to navigate a system where dispatchers cannot easily and intuitively identify the location of the caller.

Moreover, beyond the short, one-mile section of the Metropolitan Branch Trail, D.C.’s trails are not marked in a standard way. Rock Creek Park, Oxon Run Park, Marvin Gaye Park, and Suitland Parkway all lack mile markers. If a trail user doesn’t know the official name of the trail or the closest road intersection, the 911 system is not set up to help them. Their location is in the system, buried under the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statter911.com/2016/08/31/another-dc-911-failure-call-takers-dont-know-city/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.popville.com/2016/09/disturbing-report-on-the-metropolitan-bike-trail-and-more-disturbing-911-response/>



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search term: "Trail -". This will not help a dispatcher in conversation with a trail user who knows, for example, that they are "somewhere" on [the 9 miles of] Rock Creek Trail.

Washington D.C. is growing and increasing in density. Since 2000, the number of people commuting by bike has almost doubled. This means more people *off* the street grid and *on* our fantastic trail system. This summer, the Metropolitan Branch Trail had about 3,000 trail users per week recorded by the trail traffic counter. As DC's trail system grows, and as more citizens regularly take advantage of these amenities (such as the 4.5 miles of new trail in the Anacostia Riverwalk system opening this month), we must ensure that emergency services for these popular pieces of our transportation and recreation infrastructure are just as great on the trail as on the urban street grid.

Members of the WABA staff had the pleasure of conducting on-site roll call trainings earlier this summer in conjunction with the District Department of Transportation ("DDOT") regarding the MBT. This was a good first step. However, the problems with 911 assistance and dispatch, especially when calling from the MBT, are larger than an eight- minute training could address.

Moreover, training is an excellent intermediary, but doesn't solve the larger problem. Trails have been added into the system but buried in non-intuitive search terms like "Trail - Metropolitan." There shouldn't be missing locations, everything should be redundant, and it should be intuitive to search. We need to set our dispatchers up for success with data that is easy to navigate. In the vital and fast-paced work that is 911 dispatching, we can't afford to have the system clogged and slowed by obscure search terms. The 911 addressing system for trails needs to be overhauled so that it is intuitive, comprehensive and consistent.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Judiciary Committee, Office of Unified Communications, the District Department of Transportation and the 911 dispatching team to correct addressing issues. The mile markers on the Metropolitan Branch Trail, the dispatcher training earlier this year and the work that is being done to integrate the new Anacostia Riverwalk Trail section into the system are fabulous steps. Let's make sure that we do it right, make it an intuitive system for both callers and dispatchers and don't leave citizens without support.

Sincerely,

Tamara Evans, Advocacy Director  
Ursula Sandstrom, DC Trail Ranger Coordinator