

Testimony for Department of Transportation Oversight Hearing from the Washington Area Bicyclist Association - 2/27/23

Good afternoon, Chair Allen and members of the committee. My Name is Garrett Hennigan, I live in Ward 6, and I am testifying on behalf of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association and its 6,000 members in the Washington Region.

WABA empowers people to ride bikes, build connections, and transform places. We envision a just and sustainable transportation system where walking, biking, and transit are the best ways to get around. DDOT is an essential agency to realize this vision in DC.

As a lead agency in the Mayor's Vision Zero Action Plan, DDOT plays a pivotal role in making our streets safe. Compared to 2021, DC's worst year for traffic fatalities since 2007, we are relieved that total fatalities dropped from 40 to 35. But DDOT, and not just DDOT, must work harder and in so many cases differently.

Cities that have achieved Vision Zero have succeeded by adopting the safe systems approach. This approach means re-engineering roads to reinforce safe choices, to reduce opportunities for conflict, and separate vulnerable users from those most capable of inflicting harm. A safe systems approach assumes that people make mistakes and bad choices. So, rather than try to prevent all human error, engineer streets to ensure that when mistakes do happen that severe injuries and fatalities are unlikely.

Building out the Low Stress Network

In 2022, DDOT made strides in building out DC's bicycle and multi-use trail network. The department finally cut the ribbon on the Met Branch Trail extension to Fort Totten and opened sections of the Douglass Memorial Bridge trails. DDOT completed miles of new protected bike lanes including a new network in Park View, filling in gaps in SW Waterfront, Virginia Ave, Ward 7's 2nd protected bike lane, and near completion on the 9th St. NW safety project. DDOT's active transportation team and planners deserve accolades for their hard work and commitment.

Yet, the pace of buildout is insufficient. In the same time it takes DC to finish ten miles of disconnected protected bike lanes, other cities have built dozens of miles of high-capacity protected bike lanes. The public input process and staff capacity are major constraints to action. It also explains why additions to the network leave so many gaps and why the bike network is not equitably distributed across the city.

Public input is a critical component of community consultation and helps communities achieve multiple goals with a single project. But, too often projects that are backed up by long range plans, policies, safety data, community petitions, ANC resolutions, and even Council legislation, are still subjected to multiple rounds of debate over the same topics. This process should not rely on people desperate for basic safety infrastructure to beg over and over for action and should not give convenient driving and public safety equal footing. An action-oriented approach should focus on "how" DDOT delivers on its commitments, not "if" DDOT should carry out settled transportation goals.

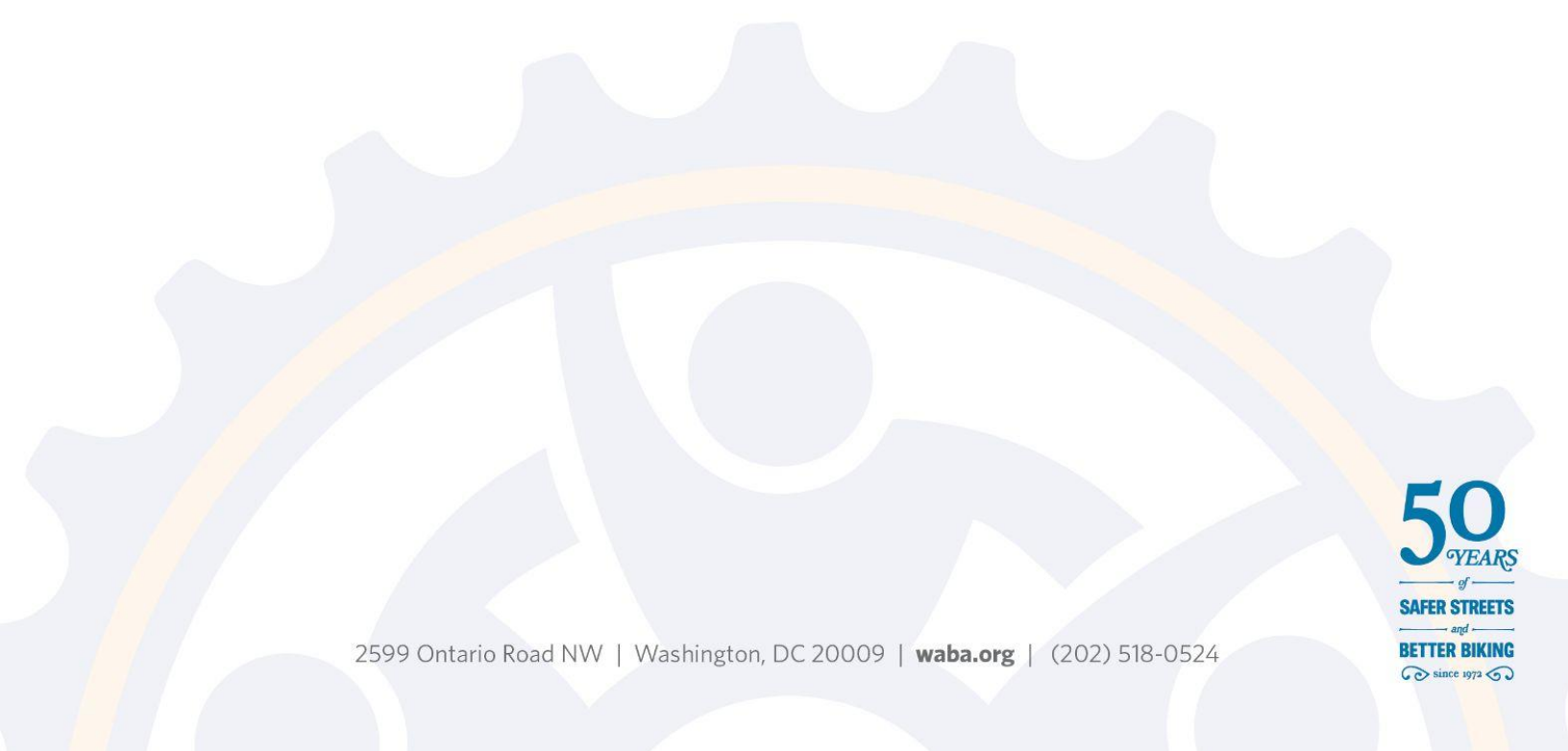
DDOT's Should Revamp its Approach to Safe Accommodations Process in Public Space Permits

Just as important as building out the network is taking care of the network. Unfortunately, DDOT's Public Space Regulatory Administration, which manages public space permits, is not following through when it comes to safe accommodations. DC law requires that any construction occurring in a public sidewalk, bike lane or trail, must provide an equivalent and safe accommodation around or through the work site. DDOT's regulations are specific on where and how this should happen, empowering permittees to close driving and parking lanes for temporary walkways and protected bike lanes. The intent is that even when construction must disrupt a street, that existing safe and convenient paths for vulnerable people remain open. The law and regulations allow very few exceptions to this requirement.

In the last year, we have seen more than 70 cases of construction closing sidewalks and protected bike lanes without safe accommodations. We should not be surprised to see pedestrians walking in the street or bicyclists traveling against traffic when construction has interrupted their expected route for half a block. This is not an individual behavior problem, but a system failure. In some cases, contractors or utility companies are working without a permit. In others, they have a permit, but are not following the approved traffic control plan. More inspectors are the solution in these cases.

But far too often this year, DDOT staff have approved public space permits and even DDOT projects that close sidewalks and protected bike lanes on major streets without safe accommodations. When the "Last Resort Analysis" results in putting pedestrians and bicyclists at risk, but allows car traffic to flow freely in multiple lanes, it suggests an unacceptable bias for moving cars at all costs. DDOT should revamp the process so that unsafe permits are not approved, retrain staff and contractors, and set up an easy option for residents to report violations through 311.

Thank you.



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