

10 Good Ideas for Transportation in the Federal City

The District of Columbia Transportation Plan completed in 1997 set forth a transportation vision for the city in which, "Transit, automotive travel and parking, water transportation, bicycling and walking will be balanced and integrated to offer excellent internal mobility, along with convenient access to City gateways, the region, the eastern seaboard and the world." The Committee of 100 supports this vision for transportation in the Federal City and calls upon the District government to begin to translate it into action.

Since the release of the 1997 plan, several other transportation reports have weighed in on the transportation needs of the city. On the heels of the state plan, came a joint report by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the D.C. Department of Public Works mandated by Congress. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) released its expansion plan in April 1999. Also in 1999 the Deputy Mayor for economic development convened a transportation task force and the Office of Planning sponsored a downtown transportation task force.

This wealth of transportation analysis has produced a lot of good ideas. The Committee of 100 has identified ten ideas that offer the promise of fulfilling the vision of a balanced transportation system for the District of Columbia.

1. Intermodal Transportation Centers

Intermodal transportation centers could intercept tour buses and automobiles before they enter the central business district and the Mall. The centers would provide transit services, bicycle rentals and amenities for idled tour bus operators. The purpose of intermodal transportation centers is to keep automobiles and tour buses from overwhelming transit, walking and bicycling in the city.

The centers would be located at existing or planned transit stations on the perimeter of the city and Union Station. The location of the centers is critical. Locations that are not transit oriented or which bring automobile and bus traffic into the core of the city defeat the purpose of the city and throw the transportation system out of balance.

The National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, General Services Administration, commercial parking interests and private tour bus companies would be partners with the District government in developing the centers.

2. Transit Service Expansion.

The Subcommittee supports the "Transit Service Expansion Plan, April 1999" adopted by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). This document presents a twenty-five year plan. "The plan proposes a program of transit

investments that will more closely marry bus services, rail services and highway improvements in order to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the regional transportation network.”

The region must commit to doubling the ridership on the transit system by year 2025 to just maintain the modal share of transportation in the region. The Expansion Plan has four major elements:

- ← **Improve Access to and Capacity of the Metrorail System.** This includes expanding and enhancing bus services and remote park-and-ride lots feeding Metro Rail; improving pedestrian and bicycle access; acquiring additional rolling stock to support ridership growth and address passenger loading conditions; and provide further operational flexibility and connectivity for improved service delivery. The extension of hours of service for Metrorail would support a vibrant downtown D.C.
- ↳ **Improve bus service levels and expand to new service areas:** Provide expansion of service to new markets, improve bus quality, initiate innovations such as seamless fare media. Reverse the trend of reductions in service in the District, which has a much higher percentage of bus ridership than the rest of the region.
- ← **Expand Metro Rail Stations, Entrances and Station Capacity.** The New York Avenue Metro Station is being planned, challenging the private developers in this corridor to incorporate access to the station in their site plans. A passageway between Farragut West and Farragut North Metro stations would facilitate transfer between the Red and Orange/Blue Metro lines. An additional entrance to the Foggy Bottom station would improve access to the station closest to Georgetown.
- ← **Expand Fixed Guideway Services:** This includes heavy and light rail expansion. Heavy rail expansion in the District would include a station in the New York Avenue corridor. Light rail in the District would complement the existing Metrorail system. Light rail in dedicated transit rights of way would move people around the downtown, Mall, and Georgetown, as well as to connect neighborhoods such as Adams Morgan and Minnesota Avenue, Georgia Avenue and Barney Circle. A bus circulator system could begin in the near term as the planning, funding and construction of light rail works its way through the multi-year process that will be required for implementation.
- ← **Bus Circulator Systems:** New bus circulator systems have been proposed for various parts of the city. Bus circulators would improve mobility for shoppers, visitors and daytime populations in commercial, business and tourist areas. Circulators would complement economic development and add to tax revenue from increased retail activity. Bus circulators should be coordinated with existing transit to maximize their combined benefits, and minimize the potential

for inefficient duplication of service, competition for passengers, fares and subsidies needed for their support.

In addition to creating new transit capacity, initiatives and incentives for increasing the demand for transit services should be aggressively pursued by the public and private sectors in the District of Columbia.

- < **Transit Subsidies for D. C. Government Employees.** Transit subsidies are an incentive to employees to use transit for their work trip. Some Federal government agencies, the state of Maryland, and Arlington County offer subsidies to their employees, providing a model for private sector employers in the area. The District government should institute such a program, which could be financed by charging market rates for employee parking at District government worksites.

- < **Retail/Transit Cooperative Marketing.** The attractiveness of doing business in the District due to the availability of transit should be more widely advertised by businesses. According to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the work trip constitutes less than 21% of trips made in the metropolitan Washington region. Over 25% of trips are for shopping and conducting other personal business and 20% of trips are for socializing and recreation.

Commercial interests and Metro could offer coupons for transit services to shop, recreate and socialize downtown using transit. Increased marketing of expanded hours of service and the bike-on-rail program should be instituted to capture new riders.

1. Land Use Planning

Transit Oriented Development. Increasing the density of mixed-use development around Metrorail stations will increase economic activity while taking advantage of the investment already made in transit. Columbia Heights and the Southwest Waterfront are sites of current planning activity. Fort Lincoln, Anacostia and Georgia Avenue are all candidates for transit oriented development planning. Fine grain planning to support pedestrian and bicycle mobility in these areas is critical to the success of these developments.

Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan for the District should include transportation policy objectives that are the responsibility of the Office of Planning to implement in the context of neighborhood and site planning projects. The revitalization of the Office of Planning to guide the implementation of the District's land use policies is encouraging. Transportation planning resources within the Office of Planning should be part of its reconstruction strategy.

Split Rate Tax. The split-rate tax works against the excessive reliance on cars. It encourages compact growth, neighborhood renewal and in-fill development in the

core and inner suburbs. By reducing sprawl, the greater urban densities make it more feasible and economical to provide high quality mass transit. It discourages the tendency to hold sites out of use for future gain, especially along transit routes, at transportation nodes and at other strategic locations where growth is most desired from a community planning standpoint.

4. Bicycle/Pedestrian Transportation

In the reconstruction of District roads due consideration should be given to accommodating bicycles. Bicycle accommodations, including bike lanes and wide curb lanes, should be a presumed feature of reconstructed roads unless proven to be undesirable or impractical.

Expanding bicycle/pedestrian planning, design and engineering capacity in the Department of Public Works would allow the District to take advantage of the substantial Federal dollars currently available to integrate bicycle and pedestrian accommodations into transportation projects. This capability is a Federal requirement of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century.

The District received Congressional funding as part of TEA-21 to construct the Metropolitan Branch Trail, which was later designated a National Millennium Trail by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The Metropolitan Branch Trail is a significant transit enhancement project, providing access to 7 Metro Rail Stations, the commercial bus terminal, and Union Station. The Trail would also enhance the commercial development taking place in the New York Avenue corridor by providing much-needed green space and a non-motorized commute route for the expanded workforce in the area. The District should integrate the Trail into the economic and transportation planning taking place in this corridor.

A recent study by the Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP) revealed that the District of Columbia had spent 12 cents per resident on bicycle and pedestrian facilities from 1990-1999. This level of spending places D.C. fifth from the bottom of state spending for these types of facilities, and behind neighboring Maryland and Virginia as well. Bicycle facilities both on the street, such as bike lanes, and at destinations, such as parking in commercial centers and commuter facilities at worksites, are eligible projects for Federal transportation funds. Bicycle facilities are the incentives needed to encourage District residents and visitors to use this transportation mode.

5. Transportation Efficiency

The District of Columbia has a street system that generally works well. The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Transportation Planning Board released the results of regional survey in December 1999 that revealed District residents were twice as likely to express satisfaction (4 and 5 on a 1-5 scale) with the current transportation system as Maryland and Virginia residents. The District should build on its generally successful transportation network by ensuring that the growth of trips in the future are dealt with most efficiently. A specific project on New York Avenue

and a general policy of dedicated transit and bicycle lanes would provide this efficiency.

- ⟨ **New York Avenue.** Efficient street operation does not depend, primarily, on the width of streets. It is a function of intersection capacity which, in turn, depends on minimizing conflicts between opposing traffic flows. New York Avenue, for instance, operates well below capacity because of a bottleneck at its intersection with I-395, as detailed in the Committee of 100's recent report "Mt. Vernon Square Concept Plan for a Downtown Residential Neighborhood". This bottleneck compromises New York Avenue operations at least as far east as Florida Avenue and beyond.

That intersection now operates at such a low "F" Level of Service that it does not register on the Highway Capacity Manual intersection software. But if a depressed ramp is added under the Avenue, carrying southwest bound New York Avenue traffic to I-395 south bound, the intersection will operate at "C" Level of Service during the morning rush hour and "E" Level of Service during the evening rush hour. (This assumes the same demand after ramp construction as before ramp construction; in fact, because increased capacity will create increased demand, the Levels of Service through the improved intersection cannot be predicted accurately.)

The cost of such a ramp would be a very small fraction of the cost, and would create a very small fraction of the disruption, of the tunnel proposed elsewhere.

- ⟨ **Dedicated Transit and Bicycle Lanes.** The efficiency of transit and bicycling is limited on arterial streets in the District of Columbia by the lack of dedicated lanes. Through the early 1980's these lanes were used on Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues and then disappeared with subsequent restriping due to limited use and ineffective enforcement. The width of these streets as well as Massachusetts Avenue, New Hampshire Avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue, and others with sufficient potential for bus and bicycle demand, invite a reallocation of the available space to the transportation modes that offer the greatest efficiency, not the one mode that is most inefficient – the single-occupant automobile.

6. E Street, NW: Restoration of the Street Grid

An essential step in the restoration of the District's street grid is the creation of an E Street Avenue, NW connecting the Kennedy Center to the downtown. This will create a pleasant walking environment by extending the sidewalks of the surrounding community. A restored E Street will give the Center a direct pedestrian and bicycle link to the east toward downtown Washington. Properly designed, E Street can also provide an uncongested transit link for Metro buses, taxis and the Tourmobile. The details of restoring E Street and the accompanying action needed for successful implementation are included in the Committee of 100's "Comments on the Kennedy Center Access Study" (January 2000).

7. Curb Space Management in Commercial Activity Centers

The curb space in commercial areas of the District should be managed to provide efficient goods deliveries and ensure the availability of short-term visitor parking for adjacent commercial concerns. “Smart” parking meters could be programmed to provide a higher rate for commercial delivery vehicles during periods of the day and revert to lower, short-term visitor rates at other times. Enforcement of the time limits at meters would keep commuters from “feeding the meter” during the business day, monopolizing space meant for short-term parking needs.

Business owners should be encouraged to use existing alleys for rear entrance delivery whenever possible to reduce congestion in the curb space in commercial areas. Expansion of buildings into the alley right-of-ways should be discouraged to preserve this space for the free movement of delivery vehicles.

8. Transportation Management

Law enforcement should be part of transportation management in the District. This would not only greatly improve public safety, but also help assure smooth traffic flow and thereby maximize road capacity. Commercial deliveries in rush hour curb lanes, intersection gridlock, and erratic bicycle and pedestrian movements in traffic erode the efficiency of the street system.

9. Transportation Financing

With the passage of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) federal funding, along with local matching funds, have creating the largest pot of money for transportation in the history of the District of Columbia. This comes at a time of historic levels of deterioration of the District’s transportation infrastructure. Even if the Federal funding levels continued, the local matching funds are shrinking, casting doubt on the District’s ability to maintain or improve its transportation system. There are some good ideas for transportation financing and efforts to refine and implement them should be a priority.

- ⟨ **Raising Right of Way Fees.** A Right of Way (ROW) Valuation Study was recently completed for the District. The purpose of the study was to assist the Department of Public Works to establish ROW rental fees as a reliable funding source to maintain and improve the District’s ROW and transportation infrastructure. The study included findings related to taxes, ROW valuation methodologies and projected ROW rental fee revenues. The study concluded that District taxes were high but not the highest nationally when compared to other cities with similar populations.

Based on ROW methods used by other local governments, the study projected approximately \$30 million in annual ROW rental revenue. The study determined that the distinctive difference between the District and other cities surveyed is

that the District charges a nominal amount for a public space permit to access the ROW. Other cities utilize not only a permitting process and assess street cut fees, but also require franchise and/or license agreements for rental of the ROW to generate revenues.

- < **Federal Role.** The District should request that the U.S. Department of Transportation designate more city streets as part of the National Highway System. Thousands of interstate commuters use these streets daily. This would allow more federal dollars for maintenance and repairs.

The federal government should be asked to participate in transportation projects that relate to specific federal agencies' presence in the District. Examples may include the Department of Defense helping with the cost of access as it leaves the Navy Yard or the Department of the Interior providing funding for projects in and around the Anacostia Rivers. The Smithsonian, Department of Interior and GSA have partnership responsibilities for the parking and circulation needs of the millions of tourists their presence generates each year.

10. Transportation Management Systems in the District Government

Establishing a Department of Transportation should become a high priority action item for the Administration. The current management structure for transportation in the Department of Public Works is untenable. In 1997 the Division of Transportation was created to provide better coordination and accountability for the various functional transportation areas within the Department of Public Works. The Division is currently without a Director. The understaffing of the transportation functions within the Department in recent history is perpetuated by the lack of a strong executive for this critical government service.

The U.S. Department of Transportation and D.C. DPW report, "Transportation in a World Class Capital", pointed out the need for "...an ability to 'get things done' despite the political and institutional impediments that complicate planning, design, construction, operation and maintenance" of transportation in the District. The creation of a Department of Transportation would make accountability for "getting things done" possible in the District of Columbia.

The report makes specific suggestions which should guide the District in establishing a Department of Transportation:

- < Establishing clear roles and responsibilities for implementation;
- < Using a greater variety of procurement and contracting mechanisms;
- < Packing combinations of activities to reduce the number of procurements; and
- < Using public/private and D. C. government/public agency partnerships to streamline procedures and to leverage scarce funding and staff resources.