

DCST



DC SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

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Phil Mendelson
Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Cc: Members of the DC Council

June 9, 2017

Dear Chairman Mendelson and members of the DC Council,

DC Sustainable Transportation (formerly DC Surface Transit) is eager to see the existing streetcar on H Street/Benning Road kept in a state of good repair and extended to Benning Road Metro in Ward 7. We are concerned by cuts in the recently-passed capital plan which, according to the District Department of Transportation, do not leave sufficient funds, or funds soon enough, to proceed with the Benning extension or cover safety-related needs for the existing line.

The budget office claimed that cuts have only been made to “design of the Union Station to Georgetown line, a propulsion study, vehicle design, and replacement of existing vehicles” and that the Benning Road extension has not been cut. However, after discussions with DDOT, we are concerned this is not accurate.

First, our understanding is that much of the funding in the first category in DDOT's spending plan (labeled "SYSTEMS/ASSET MANAGEMENT"), all of which were cut, are necessary for ongoing streetcar operation and safety. Program management is needed to ensure proper oversight and operations. The system requires maintenance, repairs, and safety modifications that arise (for instance, some heavy finials must be removed for safety).

We would not want to see the DC Streetcar fall into the same hole as Metrorail or the DC Circulator, where inadequate preventive maintenance on a new system and new vehicles is allowed to build up until the system performs poorly and requires even more capital investment to bring back up to a state of good repair.

The propulsion study and other analyses of off-wire operation were required by the Council and the subject of questions to DDOT Director Leif Dormsjo when he first came onto the job. A change in the Council's policy and expectations around streetcar propulsion should be debated at a hearing and through legislation rather than budget action.

We also understand from DDOT that federal dollars in the budget cannot be used for design, preliminary engineering, or construction of the actual transit infrastructure. Many of the expenses for Benning in the next two fiscal years are of that type, so our understanding is that the design and engineering will not be able to proceed without other funding.

We ask that the Council at least restore funding for the next two fiscal years so that progress on safety, effective management, and preparations for Benning Road can continue while the needs for future years can be more fully worked out when not operating under the urgency of an imminent budget vote.

The eastward extension would assist many residents of DC in reaching jobs and other destinations in the District, improving transportation in a part of the city that has long had fewer options than west of the Anacostia. It would help more people travel without reliance on automobiles, reducing traffic in congested downtown areas. And it would do so with greener technology than is used for existing cars and buses.

One additional point: We believe that ending the streetcar permanently at Union Station would be shortsighted. DDOT's recent study projects a weekday ridership of 20,000 riders per day on the full east-west line (or 5,700 riders per mile), almost double the ridership level of the existing system and exceeding the per-mile ridership of every US light rail system except for the Boston Green Line.

The transfer to the Metro at Union Station requires a significant walk, and the Red Line is often congested at Union Station. This was never designed to be the ultimate western terminus of the line. It is also worth noting that the planned line west of Union Station was to have addressed many of the concerns raised in the streetcar's first phase, such as utilizing dedicated lanes to provide speedy and reliable travel through the congested center of the city.

If a full extension to Georgetown is not possible, the streetcar nevertheless would serve many more riders in a more useful way if it reached the downtown area, such as the Metro at Gallery Place or Mount Vernon Square. This would allow riders to reach many jobs and destinations and connect to the Yellow and Green Metro lines.

The streetcar has been rightly criticized for cost overruns and delays, some of which were not intrinsic to the project but rather internal government dysfunction. However, a smaller degree of future investment can turn this asset into a much more useful and valuable one, and we hope the Council will not be penny wise and pound foolish on the crucial issue of east-west transportation in DC, nor will it let an existing asset fall into disrepair and poor safety.

We ask you to restore the funding as proposed by the Committee on Transportation and the Environment at least for FY18 and FY19, allowing time for a more deliberative analysis of the real streetcar funding needs and priorities.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read "David", with a stylized flourish at the end.

David Alpert

Executive Director, DC Sustainable Transportation

DCST is a non-profit organization which organizes business, advocacy, and government entities to promote shared priorities for DC transportation. It is dedicated to making the District of Columbia a global leader with frequent, rapid, safe, affordable and reliable transportation options into, out of, and around the District's job centers.