



Feb. 9, 2024

Good afternoon. My name is Alex Baca and I am testifying on behalf of Greater Greater Washington, where I serve as D.C. policy director.

I devoted the majority of GGWash's [2023 DDOT oversight testimony](#) to the whereabouts of a report on road pricing that was [originally required to be released by the District in 2020](#). My organization is grateful to the committee for its inclusion of a subtitle in the FY24 Budget Support Act, the Congestion Pricing Study Update Amendment Act of 2023 ([page 71](#)), which states that, until a contract to update and release the report is issued, DDOT "shall not make a capital reprogramming unless the council approves the reprogramming by resolution." As the committee is aware, DDOT has not issued a contract to update and release the report, which Section E of the FY23 BSA required by Oct. 1, 2023.

The release of the report is not about whether there will be road pricing in the District, a concept that, even with full-throated support of all elected and appointed decisionmakers, would take nearly a decade to assess and implement. Rather, its suppression raises questions about public administration: *Is the study of any given issue by the D.C. government the equivalent of implementing that policy, as DDOT's response to prehearing question #58 implies? And, there are inherent matters of government transparency: Can the District's executive branch ignore something that the District's legislative branch passed a law requiring it to do?*

Road pricing, which imposes "[a price on a vehicle's use of the road based on time of day, location, type of vehicle, number of occupants, or other factor](#)," will charge drivers of single-occupancy vehicles for something they currently get for free: the ability to drive into the District, at any time of day. (Drivers on the District's roads [pay only a third of the cost of building and maintaining those roads, putting us 49th in the nation among our peer states for the proportion of these costs paid by the public purse instead of users](#).) It is, therefore, not a popular proposition on its face despite its [multitudinous benefits, including](#) "consistent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in areas with a pre-existing air quality concern." Additionally, road pricing is estimated to generate \$90 to \$500 million in [revenue](#) per year.

I have struggled to find an equivalent policy, or policies, that would deliver the benefits and revenue equivalent to road pricing. My very rough calculation is that to reach even the low-end estimate of \$90 million in revenue alone, residential parking permit costs would have to increase to \$2,000 per year (from \$50), and the gas tax would need to increase to over \$1 per gallon (from 33 cents).

In 2023, GGWash commissioned research to estimate "impacts that could be caused by a hypothetical traffic reduction scenario that would reduce car travel on all streets within the District of Columbia by 10%," which is about the drop necessary to reduce traffic congestion here. At the same time, that research looked at "an additional traffic calming scenario that would negate increased car speeds which would otherwise result from traffic reduction while simultaneously improving conditions for people walking." The study found that:

“The combination of congestion pricing and traffic calming would cause no further reduction in the average Washingtonian’s access-to-destinations. The average levels of access by car would decrease, since drivers would no longer enjoy faster car speeds but would still face the cost of the congestion charge. However, average levels of access by walking would increase, compensating on average for that decrease in access by car.”

While we think that reduced access by car for District residents is an acceptable tradeoff for greater access by walking—[which induces more spending at retail destinations](#) and [has substantial health benefits](#)—DDOT’s response to prehearing question #58 does not center that concern:

DDOT has been in communication with Council regarding the congestion pricing report. We’ve shared our concerns that at a time when so many of our residents and businesses are still struggling to recover economically from the pandemic’s impacts, imposing a congestion tax undermines our collective efforts to retain and attract residents, visitors, and businesses. It would impose a fee on the millions of 5 Americans who come to Downtown DC to visit their Congressional representatives, enjoy the District’s vibrant hospitality scene, and see our national monuments, memorials, and museums. We are working to improve our bus infrastructure and bikeways and facilitate opportunities for pedestrian travel to promote multimodal access to our downtown neighborhoods as preferred options for commuters. We see this development as a critical first step before restricting travel or leveeing fees for cars traveling downtown.

DDOT is committed to improving transportation safety and developing a safe, equitable transportation network for the District and all our roadway users.

We understand pandemic-recovery-related hesitation. But we are within reason to politely disagree that “imposing a congestion tax undermines our collective efforts to retain and attract residents, visitors, and businesses,” especially because we have never suggested that a “congestion tax” be implemented without further study—hence our continued push for the report’s update and release, *not* for the immediate implementation of a road-pricing scheme. This isn’t really a chicken-or-egg thing. It’s long-range planning.

That said, that road pricing might disincentivize some people from driving into the District *is the point*; the congestion, risk, pollution, and inconvenience caused by single-occupancy vehicles, particularly driven by people who absolutely *can* take public transit, *is* a threat to the retention and attraction of District residents, visitors, and businesses. We’d like DDOT to at least consider the negative effects of single-occupancy trips on the District’s economy,¹ and a report financed with public dollars does not impose a charge of any sort. It *would* provide information about the information of such a charge, without

¹ DDOT’s stated position on the road pricing report is one grounded in economic concerns, so we have focused our testimony on the economic benefits of a District in which fewer trips are made by car. However, vehicular emissions and traffic, [as documented in a report on transportation, racial inequities, and public health in the District](#) that GGWash produced with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, result in poor air quality and injurious and fatal crashes, which are not evenly distributed across the District. Those negative impacts intersect with other disadvantages, such as lower household incomes and poor public-health outcomes, and result in higher rates of asthma, coronary heart disease, and mental-health distress. In addition to traffic safety violations and lack of transportation access, neighborhoods where the median income is below \$50,000 and where the majority of residents are Black or Latino, experience worse health outcomes, such as asthma, coronary heart disease, and mental health distress. The report does not causally link the above effects, but negative outcomes associated with high-traffic roads (asthma, mental health distress, traffic violence and fatalities, and less access to public transit) are obviously exacerbated by single-occupancy vehicle trips. “The economy” is only one vector through which to consider transportation policy and planning.

which no informed discussion can be had or decisions can be made. Further, in light of WMATA's budget gap, the committee should ensure that the District's stated \$200 million additional investment in the system by making transit *the* option, not *an* option, to bring people into the District. Downtown will not successfully recover without a focus on a safer and more multimodal city that makes its roads less dangerous for its residents, who contribute the most, day-in and day-out, to the District's economy.

I have never hesitated to compliment the excellent work of DDOT's staff. Rank-and-file employees are doing, I truly believe, the best they can to advance the goals that the District has set for itself and grasp intimately the connection between fewer trips by car; a resilient, growing economy; and safe, healthy residents. It matters greatly that there are good people doing good work at DDOT, on policies that are making a legitimate difference. GGWash is particularly fond of the bus-priority team, and of the Traffic Engineering and Safety Division's emphasis on changing the poor conditions of the High-Injury Network. But the hard work of DDOT's staff in designing bus lanes, protected bike lanes, and installing safety improvements like curb extensions and chicanes may not reach its full potential unless people in the District take fewer trips by car. Bus lanes, for example, are [enormously beneficial to transit operations](#), and ensure [on-time performance](#), but whether they *reduce* trips by car [is unclear](#).

This is not a new or revolutionary statement: Reducing trips by car is an explicit goal of the [Sustainable D.C. 2.0 plan](#), and a need GGWash has repeatedly documented through [numerous blog posts over the past three years](#). In GGWash's 2022 endorsement process, we [asked](#) candidates running for seats on the D.C. Council, attorney general, and mayor, "Do you think there are not enough cars, enough cars, or too many cars in the District?" No respondents said there were not enough cars. That [all respondents](#) said there are either "too many cars" and "enough cars" in the District suggests that its elected representatives do grasp the need for regulations that cease to require infrastructure for the drivers of single-occupancy vehicles. Perhaps one of those regulations is road pricing—or, perhaps, it isn't. But DDOT's good work, and the several hundred million dollars that the District invests in the agency's capital and operations every year, will not flourish to the fullest extent unless fewer people in the District drive.

Studies funded by the District should not be kept from the public, no matter how disagreeable their contents. This particular report is only disagreeable if one considers information about how the District could generate considerable, while improving air quality and making our neighborhoods safer, a threat. These are long-term gains, to be realized by policies that will take a commensurately long time to implement. The District should not shortchange its future over present-day concerns.

So, I ask that the committee identify and advance ways in which the District can reduce trips by car to protect its investment in WMATA, in bus-priority lanes, in dedicated bike lanes, and in the road-safety projects that are preventing drivers from killing or injuring people—all of which will, in turn, ensure that our city is an attractive, easy, safe, and affordable place to live, work, and visit.

Thank you,
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