



WASHINGTON AREA BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

2599 ONTARIO RD NW | WASHINGTON, DC 20009 | (202) 518-0524 | WABA.ORG

TESTIMONY OF THE WASHINGTON AREA BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION ON THE 2016 PERFORMANCE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

March 16, 2017

Councilmember Cheh and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Tamara Evans. I am the Advocacy Director of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I would like to use my time to talk about the important role the Department of Public Works plays with regard Vision Zero, and how the agency can do its part to make bike lanes safe and usable for people riding in our city.

In order to work as a transportation option for most people, low stress bike routes must be continuous. A bike lane on a busy five lane road is not much use if it requires bicyclists to swerve into 35 mile per hour traffic for a block in the middle of the route. Yet, this is required of bicyclists every day, on nearly every unprotected bike lane in the city.

Every time a delivery truck, cab, for-hire vehicle, or a driver too impatient to find a proper parking space blocks a bike lane, the low-stress network is temporarily broken. This creates an immediate safety problem, as people on bikes are forced to merge quickly into traffic. It also degrades the value of the network over time, as risk-averse users have a stressful experience and decide not to use it again.

Parking or obstructing bike lanes is illegal, but drivers do it all the time. The lived experience of anyone using a bike lane in the District is that it's hard to go anywhere without encountering at least one obstruction. There are corridors, like 14th Street between Park Rd and K St, where bike lanes are so consistently blocked by vehicles as to render them unusable. A recent study in nearby Arlington found that a single block of unprotected bike lane was obstructed an average of 49% of the time between 7am and 7pm.

Last August, we downloaded DPW's parking violation data from the District's Open Data portal. Out of more than 700,000 parking tickets issued in between January and May of 2016, only 2,420 were for parking in bike lanes. That comes to about 16 tickets per day, spread over more than 70 miles of bike lanes. That's one ticket per day for every 4.5 miles (or 30-40 blocks) of bike lane, when the available data would indicate that a block of bike lane in high use corridors is obstructed nearly as often as it is clear. This is hard to quantify, because the number of tickets issued by DPW is so low. But one ticket per day for 30 miles of bike lanes is clearly egregiously low enforcement of a dangerous road behavior.

This is a problem with parking enforcement priorities. DPW is listed as a supporting agency in the Vision Zero Action Plan strategy to protect vulnerable users through “enhanced enforcement that focuses on . . . parking in [or] blocking bike lanes.” A central tenet of Vision Zero is that agencies prioritize safety over convenience. In general, the DPW enforcement data demonstrates a pervasive failure to do so. For example: combined tickets for blocking a bike lane, blocking a fire hydrant, or blocking a bus stop, all of which put people in actual danger, numbered just over 20,000 or 2.8% of total tickets. The District issued three times as many (or more than 60,000) tickets for residential parking permit violations, which are important, but ultimately a matter of convenience rather than safety.

WABA members have also reported a different barrier to effective bike lane parking enforcement: Currently, the city’s 311 system doesn’t have a clear way for residents to report blocked bike lanes. Some 311 dispatchers know to use the “no parking anytime” ticket in the 311 system, but not all do. If the caller doesn’t know what to ask for and the dispatcher doesn’t know how to report it either, then the problem goes unreported. The lack of a specific 311 request also means the DC is not collecting data on how often bike lanes are blocked. Even if a parking enforcement request goes through, the agency’s two (or more) hour timeline for responding to these issues is unacceptably long.

Wayward drivers are not the only bike lane obstructions that pose problems. Leaves, snow, and road debris can present safety hazards for bicyclists as well. Bike lanes are part of DPW’s regular leaf collection and street cleaning schedules, but that often means that bike lanes are left full of dangerous debris for weeks after a particularly windy day.

In short, we would like to see the agency:

Prioritize bike lane and crosswalk blocking enforcement over non-safety related parking violations.

Create a simple way for residents to report blocked bike lanes, gather and report data.

Respond to those requests in a reasonable time frame and use the data to make decisions about where to allocate enforcement resources.

And lastly, develop a system to respond to, or proactively clear, bike lanes of leaves, snow and debris within a reasonable time frame.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views today.