April 30, 2020

Dear Co-Chairs Babers and Tangherlini and members of the committee,

Thank you for your invitation to speak before the ReOpen DC Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure. It is essential that we are proactive in determining how the District can both safely and sustainably transition back to normal operations in the coming months, and the recommendations coming out of this subcommittee will be a key tool as the Mayor and Council make those decisions. Although this subcommittee has a specific area of focus, it is essential that public health be the primary driver of any and all policies that the Mayor advances to the Council. I encourage members to keep this in mind as you set about this important work.

When the public health emergency is lifted, the transportation sector will necessarily be one of the first to reopen to the public. The policies we put in place as we return to normalcy must not only ensure that workers are able to get to their jobs and students to theirs schools, but also that they are able to do so safely. We must take similar precautions when considering how residents will be able to access government services—whether renewing a driver’s license, having their trash collected, taking advantage of assistance programs, or simply using our streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, and outdoor spaces. Thankfully, to date, the many District agencies that provide such services—including those under my Committee’s jurisdiction—have done an excellent job protecting the health and safety of residents and staff while ensuring a minimal disruption of services. I anticipate that they will show similar care in their approach to providing services during the period immediately following the public health emergency.

That being said, I am happy to share my thoughts on how the agencies under my Committee’s jurisdiction may safely and sustainably resume normal operations. It is my intent to pursue implementation of these recommendations through legislation, in addition to sharing them with you here; nonetheless, I hope that the subcommittee will include them as part of their recommendations to the Mayor, and that they will be a part of any package the Mayor sends to the Council for final approval.

I’ll note, I believe it is premature to share any budgetary recommendations until we have a full grasp of the Mayor’s proposal and our financial situation. I hope, however, that the subcommittee will broadly advocate for the Mayor’s budget proposal to avoid reductions in staff, where possible. In addition, any proposed cuts to government services or programs should be accompanied by clear messaging to residents of the extent and scope of any service reductions.
The **District Department of Transportation** will play a key role as businesses and schools reopen, and workers and students resume using public transportation. DDOT should work now to ensure not only that modes of transportation are safe, but also to communicate those efforts to residents, many of whom may be reluctant about using public transportation in the months following the end of the public health emergency.

First, DDOT must implement protocols to ensure that residents are, in fact, safe when using public transportation. That begins with protecting drivers: DDOT should install non-permeable dividers on all Circulator buses and streetcars that fully separate drivers from passengers. It should similarly advocate that such dividers be installed on all metro buses. Furthermore, DDOT should ensure that drivers and other public-facing staff have access to PPE, as needed, and explore putting hand sanitizer stations in locations throughout the District, including multiple stations at metro bus, Circulator, and Streetcar stops and, where feasible, Capital Bikeshare stations; companies providing dockless services, such as scooters and dockless bikes, should be pressed to reveal how they plan to sanitize their equipment. And, finally, given that Circulator fares were eliminated to accommodate rear-door loading, DDOT should explore how buses could be fitted with rear-door non-touch fare readers following the end of the public health emergency.

DDOT should consult the forthcoming CDC guidelines for reopening transit, and fully implement all recommendations. DDOT should also consult with health policy experts to develop and implement two protocols: a uniform rider protocol and a cleaning protocol for our buses, streetcars, and stops; these protocols should be made publicly available and shared with riders. The rider protocol should address whether riders should wear masks, gloves, or other protective equipment; how close riders are advised to sit near other riders; and how close they can sit to the driver. DDOT should coordinate development of the rider protocol with WMATA to ensure that messaging to riders is consistent between the two systems.

Finally, DDOT should consider how the District can aggressively accelerate our plans to expand bike lanes in the coming months, and explore how expanded sidewalks could be retained. Perhaps this is an opportunity to further identify roads, parts of roads, or areas where car traffic can be prohibited. Many residents who were previously regular transit riders may choose another method to travel to and from work and school following the end of the public health emergency, and we should anticipate an increase in biking, walking, and scooter use. Demand for bike lanes and expanded sidewalk space will likely increase, not just due to commuters, but also as residents continue to social distance, where possible. To that end, the agency should study how we can retain a limited use of vehicles, while also planning for an increased number of residents who seek the comfort and perceived safety of their cars to commute. Although these changes may be far more transient than permanent, DDOT will need to closely monitor commuter behavior to ensure that residents using our streets, sidewalks, and public transit are able to do so safely.

At the **Department of Motor Vehicles**, the agency must adopt policies to reduce the likelihood of crowds at DMV locations upon reopening—a risk, given that the agency has deferred expirations dates and deadlines for a number of items through the public health emergency. The DMV should be congratulated on the extent to which it has already move toward virtual and online services. The DMV should continue to review agency regulations and policies requiring that residents appear in person at a DMV location to complete a transaction, and adopt virtual or online functionalities for as many of those services as possible. Indeed, this could be a catalyst to further reduce the need for in-person trips to the DMV in general.
Dates and deadlines for the following items should be extended for at least two months beyond the expiration of the public health emergency in order to reduce crowds at DMV locations:

- Licenses
- Identification Cards
- Vehicle Registrations
- Vehicle Inspections
- Ticket Payments
- Ticket Adjudication Responses

Similarly, DMV should extend expiration dates and deadlines for all items set to expire within two months after the conclusion of the public health emergency. These extensions will help moderate the number of residents coming to DMV locations immediately upon their reopening, reducing the risk of overcrowding.

Finally, in light of the federal REAL-ID deadline being extended by a year, DMV should continue with its REAL-ID conversion practices while ensuring that it is doing so in a manner that does not increase the need for residents to visit DMV service centers immediately following the conclusion of the public health emergency. If DMV decides to modify its roll out of REAL-ID requirements, the agency must proactively communicate those changes to District residents.

Throughout the public health emergency, the Department of Public Works has continued to provide a number of services to the public. Many DPW staff, including sanitation workers, parking enforcement, and other agency staff have continued their largely public-facing work. As such, the agency has already established protocols and practices to ensure the safety of their staff. These include providing staff with PPE as appropriate, staggering staff roll calls, enhanced cleaning of buildings and vehicles, and limiting the number of staff in agency vehicles. In the months following the end of the public health emergency, DPW should continue following these practices to ensure the health and safety of both their workers and the residents who may come into contact with staff.

During the public health emergency, DPW has delayed enforcement of certain parking infractions and fully suspended certain agency services, such as street sweeping. Where DPW intends to resume suspended services, the agency must provide clear, early messaging to residents of these changes. I would also encourage DPW to continue to delay enforcement for at least two months after the end of the public health emergency, where feasible, and to coordinate with DMV as it plans to restart full enforcement. As noted above, it is important that DMV service centers are not overwhelmed upon reopening and coordinating ticket enforcement will help reduce the likelihood of crowds.

Finally, to the degree that DPW is involved, I encourage the agency to continue their ongoing efforts, in conjunction with the Office of Planning, to support farmers markets reopening in a safe and sustainable fashion, including making food waste drop-off sites available, where safe to do so. I was happy to learn that DPW was in support of legislation moving its composting training program to a virtual setting during the period of the public health emergency; I hope that DPW and other agencies will consider what other trainings can be made virtual during this time.
The **Department of Energy and the Environment** currently administers a number of programs to support low-income residents with the costs of utility and other bills. Given that the effects of the pandemic on workers is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, these programs will be more important than ever in the months following the end of the public health emergency. DOEE should work closely with the Mayor to ensure that funding for these programs is maintained, if not expanded, in the FY 2021 budget.

In response to the pandemic, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has suspended enforcement of a number of laws and regulations protecting the environment, under an argument that these protections unduly burden struggling business. There is no data to support the rollback of these environmental regulations; it’s an unfortunate instance of taking advantage of the public health emergency to pursue ideologically-driven and unwise environmental policies at the federal level. DOEE should explore the agency’s ability, if any, to enforce these laws as they pertain to the District, or whether the District could implement similar protections without risking federal preemption. At the very least, the agency should take steps to track and report any violations of federal environmental laws and regulations during this period of non-enforcement. In addition to these efforts, DOEE and other appropriate agencies should lend their expertise to assessments of how environmental conditions in residences and buildings—including air conditioning, heating, and other ventilation systems—could exacerbate symptoms of the virus, or possibly contribute to its spread.

Finally, during the public health emergency, DOEE has suspended enforcement of the plastic bag fee. This suspension, however, did not mean that retailers are no longer expected to collect the fee; rather, DOEE simply will not be sending out program staff to assess retailers’ rate of compliance. Other jurisdictions have suspended plastic bag bans or fees during the pandemic out of concern that reusable bags could carry the virus; in fact, some District retailers have banned reusable bags for this reason. Reusable bags, however, pose a minimal risk if washed following use. DOEE should work with retailers to message how reusable bags can be safely used, and to encourage retailers to allow customers to use reusable bags at theirs stores—perhaps with the caveat that customers using reusable bags are expected to bag their own groceries.

Lastly, **DC Water** can take several steps to protect its ratepayers during the public health emergency, and in the months to come. First, although the Council moved legislation prohibiting water utility shut offs for nonpayment during the public health emergency, DC Water had committed to doing this on its own; what’s more, the agency agreed to re-connect households that had been disconnected prior to start of the pandemic. DC Water should continue to provide ratepayers with supports of this kind, including offering payment plans to customers who fell behind on their bills during the public health emergency. In addition, where feasible, DC Water should maintain and expand its financial relief programs for ratepayers.

And, DC Water should consider exploring how evaluation of waste in our water systems can assist in monitoring the rate of infections in the District. For example, national science researchers in Queensland, Australia, recently announced a sewage-testing trial. Data from the trial will help their national pandemic response team track the spread of the virus and identify particular communities at risk. Whether this or any other scientific assessment or research could be helpful, undertaking such a trial here should at least be considered.
Thank you again to members of the committee for inviting me to share my thoughts on next steps for our public transportation and infrastructure. I look forward to reviewing your recommendations to the Mayor, as well as your research on what other jurisdictions are doing in this area. It is essential that we are proactive, and I am glad to see the work already being done to ready the District to reopen.

Regards,

Mary M. Cheh

cc: Mayor Muriel Bowser
    City Administrator Rashad Young