

Oct. 26, 2021

Testimony: Alex Baca, Greater Greater Washington

PR24-326: Director of the District Department of Transportation Everett Lott Confirmation Resolution of 2021

Good afternoon. My name is Alex Baca and I am testifying in support of Interim Director Lott's confirmation on behalf of Greater Greater Washington, where I serve as policy manager.

GGWash advocates for fair, redistributive policies that enable more housing, more affordable housing, fewer trips in single-occupancy vehicles, and fewer—one might say zero—deaths caused by drivers.

At nearly every hearing and roundtable, I reference the Sustainable DC 2.0 goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2032, and the District's Vision Zero goal of zero traffic deaths by 2025. I believe Director Lott can run the District Department of Transportation in such a way that these goals are met.

Doing so won't be easy. Historically, DDOT directors have pointed to completed projects as outcomes. This is fine, but the GGWash view is that the director's role is administration, not the delivery of individual projects nor the direct management of every single staffer.

However, the council's approved FY22 budget aggressively funds projects GGWash favors, such as the bus priority program, and Councilmember Cheh's creativity and thoughtfulness will ensure that the Vision Zero omnibus bill is fully funded in the future. I've worked in transportation advocacy in the District for over ten years, and money has typically been cited as the reason why we can't improve conditions for people on foot, on bike, and using mobility devices.

Now, DDOT is well-funded to do the sorts of projects that I and others have long asked it to do—and for that, I'm grateful. But in order to meet the District's sustainability goals, and prevent drivers from killing more people, Director Lott will need to be one of the best public administrators around. And, he'll need to simultaneously address the intense emotions of people who feel like they have been, functionally, gaslit by the agency. There is a real constituency of engaged residents, who vote, who want the District to make the hard tradeoffs inherent in decisions about traffic safety, and they've been vocal (if annoying, from time to time) about the consequences of letting deference to drivers rule policy. Trust in DDOT has plummeted just as the agency has the resources advocates like myself have requested for years.

I have long advocated for Vision Zero and stand by my previous testimonies and comments about how the District has failed to prevent people from being killed by drivers. But I have thought a great deal lately about how Vision Zero, the programmatic approach, requires decision makers to think the same as advocates.

“Convincing decision makers to think the same as advocates,” so as to build political will, has been an advocacy canard for the past five or so years; it’s what GGWash’s philanthropic funders like to see. I don’t expect Mayor Bowser, Director Lott, or councilmembers to think exactly as I do. But I do expect them to actually try to achieve the goals they themselves have adopted.

Good public administration that is goal-oriented and in pursuit of clear outcomes can go a long way toward a facsimile of “Vision Zero brain.” Zero emissions by 2025 and zero traffic deaths by 2025 are perfectly fine goals. To properly administer DDOT so as to reach them, I would like Director Lott, the mayoral administration, and the council to focus on the following:

Middle management

People are bringing their grievances about DDOT to this hearing. Directors get a lot of scrutiny, rightfully so, but Director Lott is not solely responsible for addressing those grievances. DDOT is enormous, and in my experience, strange and mysterious hurdles to completing projects or changing internal processes happen in the org chart’s middle layer. Council’s oversight should expand beyond the director, but the director’s management of his agency should involve a closer look at what’s going on with middle management.

In addition to keeping its own house in order, DDOT needs to staff up faster. The mayor funded over 50 new positions at DDOT; this is meaningless if those positions aren’t hired for. We probably aren’t going to end deaths caused by drivers by 2025, but we *definitely* aren’t going to if it takes until 2025 to hire people. I would like the agency to work with DCHR to change job descriptions and performance metrics so that it hires Vision Zero-minded staff at all levels, and does so expeditiously.

Consistent application of best-practice design standards and corridor modernization

Is DDOT using the NACTO guide? I, legitimately, have no idea. Whatever it’s using, it’s my experience that the agency does a ton of bespoke and one-off treatments. I would like this to stop. A raised crosswalk is a raised crosswalk is a raised crosswalk, not a feature of, say, the C Street NE design and nowhere else. If there’s a crash, drop the Notice of Intent requirement to change the intersection where it occurred to prevent future crashes, then apply the exact same treatment to similar intersections. These don’t need to be enormous capital projects but, rather, routine practices. Save the intensive planning and redesign work for the District’s deadliest corridors through a programmatic approach, like school modernization, that overhauls them year by year.

This will likely require opening up the black box of DDOT contracting. If Fort Myer is not able to correctly install safe accommodations, or doesn’t know how to consistently install raised crosswalks, Fort Myer should be fined, and their contracts should be reconsidered. Also, MC Dean. I rest my case.

Just kidding. I have more to say.

Penalize bad drivers

Everyone needs to drive less, per Sustainable DC 2.0: Commuter trips by car are supposed to drop from 42.7 percent to 25 percent by 2032. Driving needs to be harder and more expensive, and transit, biking, and walking need not be alternatives but, rather, defaults.

What is more pressing right now is that drivers are absolutely insane lately, and they must be stopped. Cops shouldn't be doing that. GGWash will provide whatever support the administration, the agency, and the council need to get automated traffic enforcement to work, with stricter consequences for drivers who flaunt the law. We need to take licenses away from people who have clearly demonstrated that they cannot drive safely, and we need to quickly boot and tow cars with expired and fake temp tags and multiple infractions. These should be medium-term initiatives, with a long-term intention of changing the ideology of enforcement from one of revenue generation to one of simply getting unsafe, deadly, and irrational drivers off the road.

GGWash has a number of issues, including road pricing, parking reform, and bus-priority planning, that we will continue to raise during oversight and budget hearings, as well as in our continual work with the council and administration. Those are not germane to Director Lott's appointment today. What we want is a person who can direct DDOT's staff to make serious changes in the way it does its work, and fast.

We have the political will. We have the money. The Vision Zero omnibus passed. The witness list today is a bunch of people who are asking you to stop drivers from being maniacs and a few usual suspects who are going to protest you no matter what you do. More pieces are in place than ever before for DDOT to reduce emissions and stop drivers from killing people. I am more than confident that Director Lott can do what is being asked of him and of the agency, so I hope we can get going.