May 13, 2021

Mr. Everett Lott
Director
District Department of Transportation
250 M Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003

Dear Director Lott:

We appreciate your request for comments on how the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT) might structure future initiatives to meet the goals of the “Slow Streets” program launched in June 2020, during the COVID-19 emergency. ANC3B has had one “Slow Street” on 39th Street NW between Fulton Street and Massachusetts Avenue, which was designated in the second phase of DDOT’s COVID-19 program launched in August 2020. From the time the list of proposed “Slow Streets” was first shared, corridor, the ANC and local residents have been submitting concerns to DDOT about that designation. In the Glover Park and Cathedral Heights area, many residents support slower traffic speeds. We also have a large number of people who walk for exercise and recreation, and probably even more people walking during the days of COVID-19 as a leisure pastime and for trips to local shops and other destinations. We appreciate having safe sidewalks, well-marked crosswalks, and motorists who abide by traffic rules and speed limits. But the general sense in our area was that those blocks of 39th Street were not a wise choice for a “Slow Street,” and did not meet the goals and criteria for the program.

On the specific details of the “Slow Streets” initiative, the signs and barriers were not well designed, did not meet national standards for signs and traffic control devices, and did not work effectively to achieve the stated purposes of the program, certainly along that section of 39th Street. Fortunately, DDOT agreed to remove the “Slow Streets” designation on that street and the barricades have been removed in response to requests from the ANC and concerned residents who reported crashes, close calls, and traffic going the wrong way on the one-way street a block away, the 3000 block of Idaho Avenue, because drivers were confused about what they were supposed to do to make their way to Massachusetts Avenue without using the “Slow Street.” We support and appreciate that decision.

We do not recommend including that section of 39th Street NW as part of future programs similar to Slow Streets.” Those blocks have been used for many decades by pedestrians and motorists and others to get to a school, two churches, and the local shopping area for “essential purposes.” There may be local residential streets that would make sense to have lower speeds, local traffic only, and safer spaces for walking, bicycling, and other recreational activities. We look forward to working with DDOT and the neighborhood to identify potential areas to work toward those goals.
KEY CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING FUTURE INITIATIVES

We have several recommendations for developed a safety-related program with similar goals to “Slow Streets.”

1 – Attention to outcomes
DDOT should begin by clearly identifying the goals and objectives the program is intended to address, and assess whether the program is designed appropriately to achieve the goals. The agency also should identify appropriate performance measures, focused on actual results achieved—outcomes, not inputs and outputs.

2 – Consultation
After the COVID-19 emergency is lifted, if DDOT is considering extending some of the current initiatives or making new changes in the use of streets, it should work with the people on the ground to assess what is needed. That should include consulting with affected communities—residents, ANC’s and the surrounding community. DDOT should conduct effective outreach to solicit comments and recommendations on potential program design as well as specific places where the program would be carried out. For a program similar to “Slow Streets,” the agency should weigh the comments and consider:
- the nature of the streets being considered, and specifically the way they are or have been used
- articulate the precise expectations or intentions for those streets in the future, under the proposed program
- assess how the proposed changes may alter the way people are living and currently using the streets
- identify alternative routes if any, where streets or blocks may no longer be possible to use in the same way they are currently, and assess the effects of diverting traffic onto the nearby streets.

3 – Ongoing Evaluation
The “Slow Streets” program was introduced with the statement that the District government would be evaluating the results in order to determine future steps. That is vital to making informed decisions. Through the course of implementing the program, DDOT must continue to monitor how the program is working at each location and gather data on a regular basis to assess if the goals are being met or if there are unintended negative consequences that need to be addressed. Again, stakeholders need to be included so their feedback can be included in the evaluation.

4 – Learning and Continuous Improvement
To complete the program management circle, DDOT will need to gather the results of the evaluation process, examine the outcomes, and learn from the experience by using the data and knowledge they are accumulating to develop recommendations for improving what they are doing. There have to be opportunities for stakeholders to be involved and consulted, and goals and performance measures to be adjusted to meet changing circumstances. And finally, DDOT has to have a process for adopting the improvements as part of day-to-day operations and then monitoring and evaluating the improvements and going through the same cycle again. That is what organizations devoted to learning and improving do as a means to achieve results for the people.

We need for DDOT to build in quality planning, coordination with those who are affected, data gathering, program evaluation, and continuous improvement, as part of its program implementation.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Designating Locations
When DDOT is proposing specific sites to designate as part of a program with goals similar to “Slow Streets,” DDOT should follow the standard process for developing programs designed to improve safety and mobility. That should begin with study including information gathering and data analysis as well as consultation with the community. Proposals should go through the required Notification of Intent (NOI) process for changes that affect traffic movement and parking or related aspects of transportation; an official public comment period, with careful review of comments and consideration of alternatives; articulation of both the decisions and reasons for them to ANC’s and the public, communicated to the affected community with opportunities for additional input if there are significant changes.
Signs and Other Materials

If signage is involved, or barriers or other temporary or long-term changes in the configuration of curbs and sidewalks, they should follow professional requirements and standards. That should include national standards from the Federal Highway Administration’s Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) for design, size, and placement of speed limit signs and other signs, as well as changes in traffic movement patterns and parking. Motorists cannot and should not be expected to recognize or abide by speed limits and other types of signs if the signs do not look like the official signs that drivers are taught to look for and follow.

DDOT should also consider other options instead of temporary barricades to let people know they are coming onto a street with special speed limits or restrictions on through traffic such as signs, or curb bump outs to slow traffic and indicate that movement is limited.

Speed Limits

Under the recent Vision Zero legislation, the District now officially has many more streets where the speed limit should be 20 mph, though many drivers may not yet be aware of that. The legal speed limit for local streets and collector streets is now 20 mph. It would be very useful for DDOT to make more widely known that “default” speed limit through public outreach. In some locations, the previous speed limit signs should be replaced with signs showing the new lower speed limits, and additional 20 mph speed limits signs should be posted, to bring the change to more people’s attention. It will be hard to communicate the information without signage.

And in the future, DDOT should have a clear process for implementing speed limits below the standard 20 mph. Some areas near local schools do not currently have signs for 15 mph School Zones, which should be installed. Some neighborhoods have asked to have 15 mph speed limits on local residential streets and it would be helpful if DDOT had an application form online and any applicable criteria where those interested can easily find them. That will allow residents and communities or ANCs to make a request to DDOT for speed limits lower than the new standard of 20 mph, so DDOT can review the request and install the appropriate signs, following MUTCD standards, if the location meets the criteria.

It would also be helpful if DDOT had a more effective approach to approving efforts to slow traffic on local streets. There is a prescribed system for neighbors to request a Traffic Safety Investigation or a Traffic Calming Investigation, which requires a petition from residents. DDOT should promptly review requests for Traffic Calming or Traffic Safety Assessments and respond clearly about what is doing with those requests. Our ANC has been submitting requests for 5 years and we do not have any indication that DDOT has either undertaken such safety assessments, listened to the concerns of the residents, developed recommendations to improve safety, or made the requested improvements to achieve increased safety. We understand that DDOT has had a major backlog of service requests over the past half dozen years. We appreciate the agency’s recent efforts to work down the list of accumulated requests. For the future, it will be important that DDOT be able to respond promptly to such requests, provide information on why the agency might not be proceeding on the requested work, and also allow requesters to track the progress of DDOT’s response.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brian Turmail
Chairman

This letter was approved by a vote of ☑ at a duly noticed public meeting of the Commission on May 13, 2021, at which a quorum was present. (Three of the five Commissioners constitute a quorum.) By this vote, the Commission also approves the Chairman or his designee to represent ANC3B on this matter.