



**Testimony of The Committee of 100 on the Federal City
November 17, 2010**

**PUBLIC OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
RESOLUTION TO APPROVE DC STREETCAR SYSTEM PLAN**

Chairman Graham and Members of the Transportation Committee:

I am Meg Maguire, Chair of the Transportation Subcommittee of The Committee of 100 on the Federal City. We are here to testify on the resolution to approve the District Department of Transportation's October 2010 DC Streetcar System Plan.

The DC Council is between a rock and a hard place.

The rock: H St. merchants, after years of torn up streets and barriers, are hurting badly from slow business and threats of foreclosures on their properties. The city has yet to fulfill its promises for streetcars and streetscape improvements. It's still unclear how DDOT will complete the line. Rights-of-way from Potomac Development and Amtrak for the connection to Union Station have yet-to-be secured. A costly taking of Potomac's property is called for in the October Plan. Even if DDOT can reach agreement with the owners, the price to relocate the building's loading dock and to uproot and relocate the extensive fiber optic cable network installed by high tech tenants is likely to be steep. In spite of this contorted situation, we, along with virtually everyone else in this room, believe that *DC has a moral obligation to businesses, residents and property owners to complete the streetcar project on H St./Benning Rd. ASAP.*

The hard place: You have before you a document that does not provide the level of information that you requested, nor address fundamental questions. Accepting this document suggests that the Council is willing to settle for very little informed analysis before making long-term and costly commitments on behalf of your constituents.

We have testified on three occasions during the past year about what we think a solid plan should contain. Yet, the most basic question of **who will pay to build and operate this \$1.5 billion system** remains unanswered. Unlike the April 2010 streetcar plan that referenced the Brookings Study's mechanisms for private sector funding, this plan omits private funding altogether and suggests that federal grants and reprogrammed funds from Metro debt in 2014 will do the trick. Are we missing something here? Is a business assessment too delicate to bring up when people are going out of business? Will our ailing Metro incur no other debt on which the District will have to pay interest? With

recent turndowns on two federal grants for streetcars, and with little prospect for more stimulus funding, to what degree can we depend on the Feds to come through for us?

If we, the District's taxpayers, must pay for the streetcar system, just say so. Tell us what it will cost each year, how much we need to borrow, and, conservatively, how much we will be able to allocate from federal transportation formula funds. What can we conservatively add on the income side in sales and property tax revenue generated from appropriately scaled redevelopment. Help residents understand these projections so that they will feel included in future decisions to move ahead in the face of staggering city and state budget deficits, and a federal budget that is being cooked by the angry chefs of the Tea Party.

During December, the Committee of 100 plans to release our assessment of the 37-mile streetcar routes titled ***BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS STREETCAR SYSTEM FOR A WORLD-CLASS CITY: System Recommendations and Route Assessment.***

From our analysis, the routes outlined in the April 2010 plan generally make sense and will help to stimulate economic development along a number of corridors that need investment. We raise questions about routes in Anacostia, along 8th St., NE and SE, and about the linkage from Georgia Ave. to Takoma Metro, but DDOT has the right idea about where the routes will go.

The October plan is silent on a key concern we have expressed before this committee on prior occasions: compliance with system-wide review required under NEPA and other environmental and preservation laws for of this major commitment to a new transportation system. *It is vital that DC comply with these laws, not because we have to but these reviews can help us anticipate the unexpected, institute remedial measures, and produce a better result.*

Environmental and preservation review are not onerous if done as part of planning. This was the intention of the framers of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and Section 4(f) of The Department of Transportation Act (DOT Act) of 1966. Segmented environmental review is thoroughly discredited and has too often become a way of avoiding the intention of environmental laws. Yet, DDOT has recently issued a task order under its contract with HDR Engineering totaling nearly \$1 million dollars to conduct a segmented environmental assessment in Anacostia. We strongly urge you to shift course on this matter in favor of a system-wide EIS.

Finally, we want to address streetcar system governance. We trust that Chairman Graham and other Council members have the knowledge and wisdom based on other models in the region to draft some organizational alternatives for public discussion, listing their pros and cons.

Our concern is that, in any structure, certain performance criteria be met. An essential ingredient of good governance is good public engagement through collaboration and

consensus building at every stage of planning, from policy to land use to operations and maintenance. And here we have concerns that the streetcar consultants and the DDOT staff will take the same old approach of open houses run by public participation experts where citizens roam around display boards with no chance for meaningful dialogue amongst themselves or with system designers and engineers. And a system of informing people about construction in their area is necessary, but not participatory. We would like to see DDOT make a full commitment to a sustained process of collaboration and consensus building and show us that they value citizen wisdom and perspectives on policy and procedure as well.

As you debate various options for governance, we urge the Council to *establish a formal advisory group to engage citizens in a new, collaborative context-sensitive approach* to planning the system. To achieve a world-class streetcar system will require many professional skills and talents as well as the wisdom and perspectives of neighborhood residents, civic groups and business interests. I have just written for the Transportation Research Board a publication entitled *Going the Distance Together: Context Sensitive Solutions for Better Transportation, A Citizens' Guide*. We anticipate that this guide, as well as the one for practitioners, will be published in early 2011. I look forward to making both available to DDOT and the Council. In the meantime, I am happy to confer with you further about structuring and evaluating a collaborative process for streetcars.

The DC Bicycle Advisory Council, and the DC Pedestrian Advisory Council (on which I am pleased to be serving) both provide sustained citizen engagement. Streetcars deserve no less, and we urge you to establish a DC Streetcar Planning Advisory Board to work with DDOT on future planning, policy review, technology assessment and system-wide decisions; and to report back to you on progress towards a world-class system.

Finally, my colleague, Monte Edwards of CHRS, will detail our concerns about the technology information provided on wireless systems in the October report. It is imperative that Council buy only streetcars that can be adapted eventually for wireless operation. The current cars can never be adapted for wireless use. Wireless technology is moving rapidly and is in service around the world and we should not be stuck with cars that cannot accommodate this technology.

We look forward to working with the new Mayor and Council to build a solid foundation for this promising new transportation system.

Thank you. I am glad to answer any questions.