



Phil Mendelson
Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004

June 12, 2017

Dear Chairman Mendelson and members of the DC Council,

The Sierra Club, Washington DC Chapter is alarmed by the cuts made in the District of Columbia Council's most recent budget proposal to proposed capital expenditures related to the DC Streetcar. The streetcar is the District's only near-term opportunity to add much-needed transit capacity, powered using increasingly fossil-free electricity, to the most congested corridor in the region. We implore the council to restore the funding proposed by the Committee on Transportation and the Environment for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, allowing time for a more deliberative analysis of the real streetcar funding needs and priorities.

The DC Streetcar was never meant to function as the stump that it is now. Indeed, the rationale for a full crosstown streetcar continues to grow as our city grows. Electric rail transportation is the most space-efficient and energy-efficient of all forms of motorized transportation — and since transportation generates 45% of DC's carbon dioxide emissions, meeting greenhouse gas pledges under the Paris Accord and Sustainable DC plan will require expanding rail transit.

We are equally concerned that major policy changes have been rushed through, via the budget process, without any opportunity for public involvement. Even after the amendments introduced on Monday, the budget proposal does not include adequate funding to keep the Benning Road extension into Ward 7 on track for near-term completion, and refuses to commit to the extension across downtown. Cutting funds at this juncture guarantees a future of missed opportunities and gridlock across the city, and throwing away the hundreds of millions of dollars spent to date.

The Benning Road extension would improve transportation options for thousands of residents of Ward 7, increasing economic opportunities for a part of the city that has long had fewer choices than areas to its west. The need for additional choices is starkly illustrated now that Metro has entirely closed a crucial rail segment through Ward 7 for construction. An eastward extension of the streetcar must be funded within the next few years of the capital plan.

We also call upon the council to complete the full east-west streetcar vision advanced by Mayor Gray's administration. Ending the streetcar permanently at Union Station would be shortsighted. DDOT's recent study projects a weekday ridership of 20,000 riders per day on the full east-west line. On a per-mile basis, this would exceed the ridership productivity of almost every light rail system in the country (except Boston's Green Line) and would almost double the ridership level of the existing streetcar line.

The transfer to the Metro at Union Station requires a long walk, and the Metro station is among the system's most congested. It was never designed to be the ultimate western terminus of the line. It is also worth noting that the planned line west of Union Station has already been designed to be the most advanced streetcar line in the country, with dedicated lanes on K Street to provide speedy and reliable travel down a signature boulevard through the congested center of the city.

Downtown DC requires additional transit options, and the Union Station to Georgetown streetcar segment is the only feasible near-term plan to deliver those. DC has the nation's third most populous central business district, after only New York and Chicago. Its workforce of half a million people grows steadily each year (and faster than the region as a whole); retail and hospitality employment has boomed, employers are squeezing more people into smaller offices, and dozens of tower cranes are busy constructing new buildings.

Yet our east-west transportation capacity is completely maxed out. No additional trains can be run on either of Metro's east-west subways, and the region's rush-hour gridlock is legendary. A third subway, like what San Francisco is building underneath its smaller CBD, is decades in the future -- but, with enough funding today, a new streetcar line, offering 2/3 as much passenger capacity, could be built within ten years.

Construction of the streetcar's H Street Initial Segment has been rightly criticized for cost overruns and delays. That said, naysayers were wrong: H Street is not gridlocked, business is booming -- and the streetcar, far from being "a novelty," actually enjoys ridership productivity higher than the nationally-lauded, award-winning, multi-billion-dollar light rail systems in Denver or Salt Lake City.

The Sierra Club's advocacy for the DC Streetcar stems from our long commitment to improving transit and promoting alternatives to sprawl. The Sierra Club's national policy on Urban Environment, adopted in 1986, promotes both "attractive, compact and efficient urban areas" and "improvement of... rail systems," since both "would conserve energy, water, land and building materials while enhancing the pleasure and safety of urban life." In particular, the Club's Energy Resources Policy observes that "light rail passenger trains... will reduce vehicle trips, emissions, fuel consumption, and the demand for new roads and pavement," and says that "public transportation systems are an essential component of a sustainable energy society."

We hope that the Council will not be penny-wise and pound-foolish on the crucial issue of east-west transportation in DC, nor let an existing asset fall into disrepair and poor safety. We ask the Council to restore funding for streetcar safety, management, and planning through the next two fiscal years, so that progress on the streetcar can continue while the needs for future years can be more fully worked out outside the budget process.

Sincerely yours,

Payton Chung
Board member and Smart Growth Committee chair
Sierra Club - Washington, DC Chapter

(Note: DC Sustainable Transportation contributed content to this letter.)

CC: Members of the DC Council