



DC ENVIRONMENTAL  
N E T W O R K

Anacostia Watershed Society • Audubon Naturalist Society  
DC Environmental Network • Energy Justice Network  
Institute for Local Self-Reliance • Potomac Riverkeeper Network  
Rock Creek Conservancy • Sierra Club, DC Chapter  
Surfrider Foundation, DC Chapter • Washington Parks & People  
Wentworth Green Strategies

Via Email: [Muriel.Bowser@dc.gov](mailto:Muriel.Bowser@dc.gov)

The Honorable Muriel E. Bowser  
Mayor of the District of Columbia  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004

September 10, 2020

**Re: Mismanagement and a lack of vision and leadership at the DC Department of Public Works**

Mayor Bowser,

We, the leaders of the DC environmental community, write this letter with a heavy heart. We fully understand that your administration is engaged in challenging efforts to equitably protect District residents from COVID-19 and from the associated economic impacts of this pandemic. We sincerely appreciate your leadership on that front. We also appreciate and honor the hard work District Department of Public Works (DPW) employees engage in every day. Their work and dedication have become ever more obvious during the COVID outbreak.

The purpose of this letter is to outline our very serious concerns regarding the leadership at DPW, and their lack of effort to responsibly address waste reduction, recycling, and composting in the District. We also share steps that must be taken immediately to ensure that DC meets its waste diversion goals and becomes a recognized leader in this field. We acknowledge the work your administration has accomplished through important initiatives at the DC Department of Energy and the Environment (DOEE), but seeing the contrast and lack of environmental progress at your DPW is troubling.

On June 8<sup>th</sup> of 2015, over five years ago, the environmental community sent a hopeful letter asking you to:

- *“Commence a national search for a new DPW Director who can, among the many important responsibilities of the agency, help grow a modern Solid Waste Division at DPW. We feel that there are no current DPW staff who can bring that 21st Century perspective to waste management.”*

- *“Re-Organize the Solid Waste Division and staff it with people who understand both the national and global significance of zero-waste policies and the potential for creating hundreds of new jobs in the District with new recycling and composting programs and initiatives.”*

Despite our request your administration has chosen, twice, directors from within other DC offices and agencies who had never run a public works department and had little to no understanding of modern waste management techniques. Neither Director Shorter nor Director Geldart had any expertise in waste management before coming to DPW.

Meanwhile, Deputy Director Carter, who we understand has been unofficially acting as DPW Director since Director Geldart’s assignment to the District’s COVID-19 response, worked for DPW (as Deputy Director) for over 16 years (1997-2014). During this period the District’s waste diversion (recycling) rate became the worst in the region and this was also a time when wasteful private contracts (2002), and unsustainable tipping fees, that cost DC taxpayers millions each year, were implemented. Despite our well-founded concerns, the environmental community has supported your choices to lead DPW - even testifying before the DC Council in support of your nominees. We have been patient and supportive.

However, we can no longer support these officials in their roles. Today, five years and two DPW Directors later, the undersigned organizations see that your administration has made little progress towards achieving your own Sustainable DC 2.0 goals and moving DPW into the 21<sup>st</sup> century for waste management. In fact, compared to other US cities, the District is backsliding.

Our concerns are focused in five areas.

**1. Good news at DPW has turned to bad news.**

Office of Waste Diversion Director Annie White, and staff, have been the only beacon of light for waste diversion modernization and reform within the agency. Earlier this month, we learned that Ms. White was fired by DPW. We were shocked and extremely disappointed by this action.

Ms. White was the most knowledgeable waste reduction expert in your administration. Ms. White struggled with DPW leadership. Despite the lack of leadership support, she fought effectively and methodically to modernize the most basic functions of existing recycling programs and expanded composting opportunities. While Ms. White worked diligently to get a curbside composting program established for DC, her efforts were repeatedly shut down by DPW management. It is only thanks to her tenacity and creativity that District residents have access to a minimal composting program that operates periodically across the District at farmers markets.

**2. DPW leadership is a roadblock to the Sustainable DC goals.**

Sustainable DC includes a waste diversion goal of diverting at least 80% of the District’s waste away from landfills and incinerators (waste-to-energy) by 2032. However, since the adoption of Sustainable DC in 2013, our diversion rate continues to hover in the low 20% range. In fact, DC continues to have some of the worst waste diversion (recycling) rates both regionally and nationally. Diversion from landfilling and incineration is the most basic, the most fundamental measurement for success in modern waste management. Meanwhile, plans for a municipal composting system have consistently been sidelined by DPW management.

Together with the Office of Waste Diversion, we developed and obtained funding for options that would have significantly increased the District's diversion rate. However, DPW leadership has not even empowered the Office of Waste Diversion to develop a comprehensive zero-waste plan, even though it is a short-term goal of the Sustainable DC 2.0 plan released early last year. Over the last six years, the Executive leadership at DPW - Directors Shorter, Geldart and Deputy Director of Operations Carter - has slowed down progress on waste reduction initiatives.

### **3. DPW failed to pilot a proven waste management system that will save millions.**

In the five years since we wrote to you about the importance of hiring the right leadership for DPW, we have strived to constructively advocate and educate DPW leadership about fundamental waste management innovations that are driving the success of the most sustainable cities in the country and planet, including New York, San Francisco, Santa Monica, Copenhagen, Vancouver, and many more. These cities all practice different formats of a proven variable rate pricing waste management system called Save-As-You-Throw (SAYT) - a system that can make all of our current, underperforming zero-waste recycling and composting programs more effective while saving the District millions.

During DPW Director Shorter's tenure, in 2017, we worked with DC Councilmember Cheh's Committee on Transportation & Environment to secure funding to pilot a SAYT program. Now, three years later and despite clear examples of the program's efficacy in other cities, DPW has yet to select a consultant to design and implement the pilot.

### **4. DPW leadership has undercharged private haulers, losing millions of dollars in revenue.**

On July 23, 2020, the Washington City Paper published an article entitled, "[Waste Mismanagement: How the District Loses Millions on Garbage Disposal.](#)" The article shared the problem of DPW undercharging private trash haulers while highlighting practical solutions from noted experts like Dr. Neil Seldman from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. The article notes:

*"In total, the District has lost nearly \$53.8 million since 2010, thanks to drastically undercharging private trash haulers for access to the city's public transfer stations...Meanwhile, Seldman, who advises cities across the country in solid waste disposal and recycling, sees a windfall if the District would fix its facilities and realign its fees and costs with private trash haulers. "The two transfer stations are a gold mine for future revenue," he says. "If D.C. adjusted the rates charged at its public trash transfer stations, the revenues could be dedicated to waste reduction, recycling, reuse, and composting programs."*<sup>1</sup>

Despite our advocacy on this issue over the last five years, there has been limited progress in adjusting the fees to meet the costs to District taxpayers. Meanwhile, DPW also seems to be on a path to renew costly and unsustainable waste contracts with some of the largest private waste management corporations including Covanta, Waste Management, and Republic, further obliging taxpayers to make up for lost revenue and leaving smaller waste companies out in the cold.

### **5. DPW leadership continues to embrace incineration.**

---

<sup>1</sup> [Waste Mismanagement: How the District Loses Millions on Garbage Disposal](#), Washington City Paper, July 23, 2020

Meanwhile, the District’s practice of incinerating its waste continues to exacerbate health issues such as asthma and cancer in our region, and in the community of color surrounding the incinerator. Incineration (and landfilling ash) is the most expensive and polluting way to manage waste or to make energy -- dirtier than coal burning, and worse than direct use of landfills.

Finally, since mid-2019, the environmental community has noted a lack of transparency at DPW. Office of Waste Diversion staff have seemed increasingly uncomfortable and even afraid of answering the most basic questions about the progress of DPW programs and policy initiatives. Sadly, we read how a lack of transparency and effective communication, and fear of retribution, in our federal government, is paralyzing actions needed to move our country forward. This is the current dynamic at DPW.

DPW needs both new leadership and a commitment to integrate, and support more fully, the efforts of the Office of Waste Diversion. We have lost precious time but can still accomplish the goals laid out in your Sustainable DC 2.0 plan. But, to do this, you must take immediate action including:

- 1) Immediately initiate a nationwide search and hire a DPW director committed to and with proven experience in Zero Waste program implementation.
- 2) Similarly, immediately initiate a nationwide search to hire a director of the Office of Waste Diversion committed to and with proven experience in Zero Waste program implementation.
- 3) Immediately develop the District’s Comprehensive Zero Waste plan.
- 4) Move boldly to pick a consultant and pilot Save-As-You-Throw.
- 5) Finish the job. Negotiate fair contracts with Waste Management and Republic that do not rob taxpayers of millions and are not unfair to small waste haulers. Establish sustainable tipping fees across the board.
- 6) For health and environmental justice, DPW should issue an RFP for pricing a larger landfill contract so DC would not have to renew the Covanta incineration contract.



*Mayor Bowser's Sustainable DC plan.*

Mayor Bowser, you have an opportunity to make Sustainable DC and its waste reduction goals a proud part of your legacy to the District of Columbia and a model for other states and jurisdictions to follow. The actions we outline above will help ensure that these goals are attained and that Washington, DC becomes a leader in waste reduction. We kindly request a meeting with you to share our concerns regarding DPW leadership in more detail.

Sincerely,

Christopher Weiss  
Pronouns: he/him/his  
Executive Director  
DC Environmental Network

Neil Seldman  
President  
Institute for Local Self-Reliance  
[nseldman@ilsr.org](mailto:nseldman@ilsr.org)

Catherine Plume, Chair  
Sierra Club, DC Chapter  
[caplume@yahoo.com](mailto:caplume@yahoo.com)

[cweiss@dcenvironmentalnetwork.org](mailto:cweiss@dcenvironmentalnetwork.org)

Jim Foster  
President  
Anacostia Watershed Society  
[jfoster@anacostiaws.org](mailto:jfoster@anacostiaws.org)

Ari Eisenstadt  
Pronouns: he/him/his  
DC Conservation Advocate  
Audubon Naturalist Society  
[ari.eisenstadt@anshome.org](mailto:ari.eisenstadt@anshome.org)

Charlotte Runzel, Chair  
Pronouns: she/her/hers  
Surfrider Foundation, DC Chapter  
[chair@dc.surfrider.org](mailto:chair@dc.surfrider.org)

Doreen Campbell, Chair  
Zero-Waste Committee  
Sierra Club, DC Chapter  
[dbc20009@gmail.com](mailto:dbc20009@gmail.com)

Steve Coleman  
Executive Director  
Washington Parks & People  
[www.washingtonparks.net](http://www.washingtonparks.net)

Mike Ewall  
Founder & Executive Director  
Energy Justice Network  
[mike@energyjustice.net](mailto:mike@energyjustice.net)

Marchant Wentworth  
Wentworth Green Strategies  
[marchant\\_wentworth@msn.com](mailto:marchant_wentworth@msn.com)

Jeanne Braha  
Executive Director  
Rock Creek Conservancy  
[jbaha@rockcreekconservancy.org](mailto:jbaha@rockcreekconservancy.org)

Phillip Musegaas  
Vice-President of Programs and  
Litigation  
Potomac Riverkeeper Network  
[phillip@prknetwork.org](mailto:phillip@prknetwork.org)

Cc: Councilmember Mary Cheh, Rachel Clark