D.C. Pedestrian Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes

June 27, 2016, 6:30 p.m.

441 4th Street NW, Room 1117

Attendees: Sonia Conly, Tony Goodman, Edward Johnson, Eileen McCarthy, Robin Murphy, George Tobias, Jessica Tunon, Jerry Wall, Ben Welle, Heather Edelman (PAC staff), George Branyan (DDOT), Peter Nohrden (DPR), Andrea Adleman (BAC), Barbara Cline, Jim Elliott, Jeff Johnson (BAC), Tony Towns (Office of the Attorney General).

Start: Tony Goodman convened the meeting at 6:35 p.m.

Introductions: Attendees introduced themselves.

Public comments: Ward 3 resident Barbara Cline described the difficulty crossing Connecticut Avenue NW for people who are disabled, older, or crossing with small children. Cline and her husband, who is disabled, live on Connecticut Avenue at Albemarle Street. Cline reported that her husband will step off the curb to cross while the signal is showing the white walking figure (without a countdown) and then suddenly the flashing red countdown will start, providing only 6 seconds, and the situation is scary because her husband worries that he does not have enough time to finish crossing. The countdown is too short to give him enough time to cross. Cline said there are many other signals with too short countdowns, including one on Pennsylvania Avenue NW near the White House visitor center. Eileen McCarthy suggested reporting the lack of countdown time to 311. McCarthy explained that the flashing “don’t walk” sign should start when someone would step off and have just enough time to get across. McCarthy said the short signals undermine people’s rights and are systematically rigged in favor of drivers who want to cross the city as fast as they can. Cline observed that there seems to be more time to cross downtown than up on Connecticut Avenue where there are lots of seniors and families. Sonia Conly commented that this is a Vision Zero issue and an Office of Aging issue and that if we want to be walk friendly we have to be able to walk across the street. Tony Goodman noted that a question for George Branyan or Wasim Raja is whether the light is programmed to work that way or something is wrong with it, whether the short countdown is by design or by mistake. The PAC will carry the message to Branyan (who arrived at the meeting later) and get a response. The group also discussed the problem of countdowns that jump around or are out of order (skip ahead or jump back up to higher times). The group discussed getting an update on the signal optimization project. Cline suggested the PAC collect input from people regarding countdowns that are too short or where the countdown times jump around.

MPD update: There was none.

Report from the Office of the Attorney General: Tony Towns introduced himself. His predecessor Robert White resigned to run for an At-Large Council seat. Towns described the role of the Attorney General’s office. Before Attorney General was an elected position, the office defended the District and prosecuted some adults. Now it is also responsible for answering to the needs of the public. Attorney General Karl Racine started an office of consumer protection which takes on problems of bad business practice and also provides mediation services free of charge. Towns provided some description of the different departments within the office. Towns said the office also partners with other agencies and he will contact the general counsel at DDOT and alert them to the concern about the short countdown signal on Connecticut at Albemarle. Cline wondered whether the crossing times issue could be corrected by connecting it to ADA requirements. Towns was asked about the most frequent inquiries received by the office, and he reported many requests for assistance on issues of affordable housing or whatever topics are currently in the news. McCarthy asked about the work handled by the departments that deal with criminal issues. Towns said the office handles some DUI cases, drinking in public, trespassing, etc.

DDOT update: Goodman reported on a new development in plans for a pedestrian and bike trail going from the Union Market area up New York Avenue, out to the Arboretum and over the river. VRE (Virginia Railway Express) recently proposed a new rail line that includes a bike and pedestrian trail and adds new train stations along the same route. Goodman said that the trail is a good project, but that adding train stations could be transformative for that area. VRE will work with DDOT and Amtrak. This project would potentially bring the trail, development and a new station to Ivy City. Currently, the neighborhoods of Deanwood and Fort Lincoln have limited transit options even though they have tracks right next to them. The new rail stops and trail could improve connections.

Update on Vision Zero: McCarthy reported on pending legislation and new regulations.

The DC Council transportation committee chaired by Councilmember Mary Cheh looked at three bills (Mendelsohn’s distracted driving proposal, Mayor Bowser’s Vision Zero bill, and a bicycle and pedestrian safety bill proposed by Cheh) among which there was some overlap. Now there is one combined bill, and a mark-up session was held on June 1. The bill is going to the Mayor tomorrow to be signed. Minor changes have been made from the original legislation. The changes address some of the comments the PAC had, although not all: nothing was included to limit beg buttons; the Complete Streets provision still prioritizes driving too much; the latest version drops distracted driving provisions; the aggressive driving provision has changed significantly (names specific codes that would have to be violated to identify aggressive driving); some modifications were made to rules around ATVs; repeat offenders get stricter provisions but not as much as initially proposed. DDOT has not released a new proposal on changes to regulations, but allegedly that will be released soon.

DDOT update: George Branyan arrived and addressed the issue of walk countdown times previously discussed at the meeting. Branyan reported that the signal timing on Connecticut is by design because the old way did not meet the code in the manual. Branyan said the current signal that provides no countdown during the white walking signal and then a 6-second red countdown is in compliance with code. Figuring in the added time provided by the yellow light for drivers and some of the red light time for drivers you have an additional 6 seconds for crossing. You could ask for longer flashing “don’t walk” time but engineers would take it away from the white walk time. DDOT looks at traffic count data to determine the length of crossing time, but signals cannot go below what the ADA requires for crossing. Conly said a large percentage of older people are unable to cross in the time provided. Branyan said research led to lowering the walking speed provided for crossing from 4 feet per second to 3.5 feet per second. Buttons exist (although DDOT does not use any) that will add time to your crossing time if you hold the button a couple seconds longer. ANC petitions are a way to formally request something like that. Goodman suggested doing a pilot test of those buttons.

Branyan reported that as of June 23 there have been 8 traffic fatalities in 2016, 3 of which were pedestrians, 2 were cyclists, 3 were motorcycle riders, and 1 was a vehicle occupant. A bicycle hit and run was the most recent fatality. Registering 8 fatalities in July is low. For two years in a row, the District has had 25 or 26 fatalities by the end of the year. McCarthy reported that there have not been news releases on these fatalities. Branyan was asked about trends in crashes. He said that the motorcyclists were all traveling at high rates of speed. In recent years the pedestrians struck were more often people crossing with a signal and at a crosswalk. McCarthy said the National Transportation Safety Board is taking comments on pedestrian crashes and reviewing causes. Search the ntsb.gov site for “pedestrian safety” to find the location to leave comments.

Sidewalk repair follow-up discussion: Branyan reported that Ed Carpenter of DDOT says the sidewalk condition index is almost ready to be posted on the DDOT website. George Tobias made a motion to send a letter to Director Dormsjo asking for the data to be provided. Robin Murphy seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Conly reported she has had a problem with 311 and difficulty seeing if her complaint is addressed. The group discussed inviting Robert Horton to provide an update on sidewalk repair. Heather Edelman will work with Conly to draft the letter to DDOT about the sidewalk condition index.

Approval of May minutes: Tobias made a motion to approve the May minutes. McCarthy seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

Next meeting (July 25) and future discussion topics: The following topics were considered: an update from the Office of Aging on its Vision Zero toolkit; valet parking (with DDOT, ABRA and Sgt. Thorne); signal optimization (Wasim Raja); sidewalk repair and sidewalk materials (Robert Horton); snow shoveling (Branyan will inquire about the snow team manager); contributory negligence; livability studies; the PAC’s outreach plan; improving accessibility into public buildings (DPR and/or DGS).

End: The meeting ended at 8:05 p.m.