



Idea Exchange moves DC toward transportation fun

By **David Alpert** (Executive Director) February 11, 2013  11

If you missed the moveDC “Idea Exchange,” an all-day workshop about the future of transportation in the District and the first step in a year-long project to build a transportation master plan for DC, there were three themes you can take away from the session:



Photo by carfreedc on [Flickr](#).

- Those who want to continue designing the city around more and more driving get no quarter from the top echelons of the Gray administration.
- Transportation is really mostly not about transportation.
- For anyone who thought a government-run public involvement meeting has to be boring, DDOT and its contractors just proved otherwise.

Gray is unequivocal: More cars are not the future

Mayor Vincent Gray opened his remarks with a clear message: There might be a lot of traffic, but more cars are not the answer. Instead, the District will invest in streetcars, buses, biking, and walking.

Gray cited his sustainability plan which aims to have 75% of trips in the District happen by a mode other than driving. Cars still have a place, surely, but the District has to grow other modes more than driving.

Oh, and he promised the H Street streetcar will be rolling by the end of 2013, and taxis will have credit card readers by summer.

DDOT director Terry Bellamy, DC Councilmember and transportation chair Mary Cheh, and her colleague Tommy Wells all echoed Gray's fundamental theme of multimodalism. Bellamy pointed out that everyone walks for part of their trip, even when they drive, take Metro, or another mode. Wells emphasized equity: the District needs to help all groups of residents reach jobs safely and on time.



Gray touts his sustainability plan. Photo by carfreedc.

When is transportation not really about transportation?

A panel discussion brought together author Christopher Leinberger, Slate economics blogger Matthew Yglesias, and equitable transportation advocate Anita Hairston of PolicyLink.



Leinberger, Hairston, Yglesias, and moderator Veronica Davis. Photo by Crystal Bae on Twitter.

The panel's title was the "future of transportation" in DC, but the panelists ended up talking quite a lot about broader urban planning issues. Perhaps this is partly because DDOT put two authors of books about buildings

rather than transportation on the panel, but also because transportation is often not really about transportation.

Christopher Leinberger said, “a transportation system’s goal isn’t to move people. It’s economic development. The means is by moving people.” He argued that many departments of transportation have their mission backwards. They focus on moving vehicles and freight as much as possible. That’s wrong; instead, transportation is a means to an end.

The means also directs the end. Build highways, and you fuel “drivable suburbanism,” to use his term from *The Option of Urbanism*; build transit, and enable walkable urbanism. In our region and around the country, the market demand now is for more walkable urbanism.

By not having enough walkable urbanism, Yglesias added, what does exist has become very expensive. That fuels a perception that walkable urban places are just for the affluent, but that only arises because we aren’t building more walkable urban places fast enough.

DC could fund this transit and associated economic development if it set up a “value capture” system, said Leinberger, to get some of the value the streetcar creates and plow it back into transportation. The right system could even make the streetcar profitable, he said. But there’s no time to waste. It’s like in *Back to the Future, Part 2* where Biff has the sports book listing what will happen in the future. Well, we have the book now, said Leinberger, and yet we aren’t preparing.

Meanwhile, he said, DC needs a comprehensive strategy for affordable housing, and lacks one today. Hairston, too, emphasized how important it is to remember equity when making these investments. What about the public health for those who live near new transportation infrastructure, or the unbanked who can’t as easily take advantage of programs like Capital Bikeshare?

Hairston noted that today, it’s not possible to get to 60% jobs by bus in one hour from east of the Anacostia River. She hopes the District can at least reverse that and make 6 of 10 accessible within an hour.

A public meeting was genuinely fun

I've been to a lot of boring public meetings. The moveDC Ideas Exchange might have been the most entertaining and interesting. It certainly didn't lack for manpower (and womanpower), as almost every DDOT employee was working one of many stations.

At one, people could nominate the street they think is DC's worst. Another let you place color-coded string on a map showing your commute, with the color telling whether it's by bike, bus, Metro, driving, walking, etc. There was even a photo booth.



Photos by carfreedc on Flickr.

One table let you design your ideal street cross-section, with sidewalks, medians, bike lanes, bus lanes, or whatever, then take a picture, print it, and post it on a wall. You could draw on a map of proposed CaBi stations or write parking ideas on sticky notes to go on a wall.

Greater Greater Washington contributor Veronica Davis moderated the panel and got some major praise from DDOT director Bellamy as well as plaudits on Twitter for a very interesting session.

Tough customer Alex Baca even tweeted, “I am THE BIGGEST whiner about the utility of the public-input process, but @wemovedc made today’s #IdeasMoveDC a really fun time.”



Photo by Erik Weber on Twitpic.

Of course, it might be a little easier to make a session fun when there’s no proposal half the participants have shown up specifically to fight against, as in the Office of Planning’s recent zoning update sessions. It’s worth watching to see, first, what kind of plan DDOT devises out of all these stickies and photos and yarn, and second, if all these interactive booths give any kind of serious plan a better shot at becoming reality.

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Tagged: [car dependence](#), [dc](#), [ddot](#), [events](#), [government](#), [public involvement](#)



David Alpert is Founder and President of Greater Greater Washington and Executive Director of DC Sustainable Transportation (DCST). He worked as a Product Manager for Google for six years and has lived in the Boston, San Francisco, and New York metro areas in addition to Washington, DC. He lives with his wife and two children in Dupont Circle. Unless otherwise noted, opinions in his GGWash posts are his and not the official views of GGWash or DCST.

11 COMMENTS

THREADED NEWEST AT BOTTOM NEWEST AT TOP

Jasper on February 11, 2013 at 12:08 pm

Gray cited his sustainability plan which aims to have 75% of trips in the District happen by a mode other than driving.

That would be HUGE.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Douglas Andrew Willinger on February 11, 2013 at 1:05 pm

Feudalism with a new label.

Beware anything in transportation touting the line “car-free”.

All transportation involves “cars” unless some form of a bike, boat or airplane or walking.

And what Gray seems to be promoting is a greater share upon the street grid, rather than something more appropriate, as recently done in Madrid.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Jacques on February 11, 2013 at 1:14 pm

@Douglas Andrew Willinger—interestingly enough, your comment is the only thing related to this post “touting the line 'car-free.'”

What I read was an interest in balancing a wide range of transportation options and choices, including cars, but not to the detriment of other ways that people can get around (particularly those that put less of a stress on infrastructure).

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Jacques](#) on February 11, 2013 at 1:15 pm

Correction—Douglas Willinger's post was the only “car-free” mention other than the name of a photographer's flickr name.

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Steve Seelig](#) on February 11, 2013 at 1:18 pm

Gosh, it was fun both for me and my 4 year old, who got to ask Mayor Gray for more bike lanes in Ward 3.

To reflect what the other side is thinking, this from Gary Imhoff, who I don't remember seeing there unless he arrived later. I am so thrilled as a 50-something to be linked to people much younger than me:

“Confirmation bias is also running rampant in the DC Office of Planning and the DC Department of Transportation, which are sponsoring a series of “Idea Exchanges” called “Move DC,” <http://wemovedc.org>. This past Saturday, for example, there was a Move DC meeting at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library. It was less about being an exchange of ideas and more about being a structured propaganda event, at which converts spoke to converts. It brought together a crowd of white twenty-somethings wearing spandex and carrying bike helmets to agree that, as one of the Office of Planning’s handouts was headlined, “Walking — It’s the New Driving.” As at past OP/DOT events, people with different viewpoints were discouraged from speaking out and forbidden from passing out their handouts. After this series of meetings the OP and DOT will conclude — it’s predetermined — that everyone agrees with them that cars are evil and should be banned in the city as much as possible.

“How do we convince our elected and appointed officials to listen to, respond to, and represent the interests of all of our citizens, rather than to just the small portion of those who are advocates for the anti-automobile cause that they advocate?”

Gary Imhoff
themail@dcwatch.com

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Douglas Andrew Willinger](#) on February 11, 2013 at 1:43 pm

“What I read was an interest in balancing a wide range of transportation options and choices, including cars, but not to the detriment of other ways that people can get around (particularly those that put less of a stress on infrastructure).”

I agree with that, especially with the application of superior design- aka my “Alexandria Orb” and “Grand Arc” proposals, versus the highway designs we normally see.

It is this ideological sloganeering such as “car -free” or especially “no white man's roads through black mans homes” true only for a narrow focus upon some very bad planning cir 1964 at the expense of seeing how the plans were botched, namely with the weird routing of the proposed North Central Freeway on a longer way more destructive route 1/3 of a mile east of the railroad that JFK was going to have it hug.

<http://wwwtripwithinthebeltway.blogspot.com/2012/01/crafted-controversy-scuttling-of-jfks-b.html>

Meanwhile cancelling every single northern WDC freeway places a disproportionate amount of traffic upon the Anacostia Freeway, with too little interest in its improvement and mitigation, as it is on the poor side of town.

By embracing the overly generalized attitude against freeways, people as Alpert apparently turn their backs upon this- there should at least be a project to reconstruct the Anacostia freeway as an 8 lane cut and cover tunnel beneath a new boulevard.

<http://wwwtripwithinthebeltway.blogspot.com/2012/12/11th-street-bridge-project-stresses.html>

“Environmentalists” in Alexandria who walked out of that August 26, 2000 2 part stakeholder's meeting (the 1st part being about a few trees - while leaving before the second part of the meeting about the Washington Street urban deck) speak volumes about this disdain of highway design actually leading to worse results.

<http://wwwtripwithinthebeltway.blogspot.com/2007/02/so-called-environmentalists.html>

http://wwwtripwithinthebeltway.blogspot.com/2007/02/spps-august-26-2000-rejection-of-deck_13.html

REPLY LINK REPORT

Jeff on February 11, 2013 at 2:18 pm

Of course, it might be a little easier to make a session fun when there's no proposal half the participants have shown up specifically to fight against

If more planners started off with these sort of sessions to begin with, I'd bet meeting participants would be as combative further into the design phase. At best, we're often presented with three possible scenarios for a project followed by a rather opaque final decision making process.

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Alan B. on February 11, 2013 at 2:26 pm

It's simple math. A bus is about three times the surface area of a car and can transport easily 10-20 times the number of passengers in your average car during rush hour. Each parking space is upwards of 150 sq feet. Which is more efficient use of space?

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Geronimo on February 11, 2013 at 2:49 pm

If you don't think the job of a transportation system is primarily to get a person from point A to point B in a manner that is fast, frequent and reliable you should be fired from any job relating to transit, or at least ignored. Yes, of course, transit-oriented development is an idea whose time has come and remains ignored (or underdone) by many people in government. But the *existing* transit network in the region is broken, crowded, infrequent and expensive. Don't let some lazy urban planners neglect the very important work of transit planners with the incorrect idea that all we need is a couple of pretty streetcars to create better urban places. It's not sexy but the transit system had to actually provide the ability to get from where you are to where you want to go quickly and reliably if it will ever compete with car ownership long-term.

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Alex B. on February 11, 2013 at 3:04 pm

If you don't think the job of a transportation system is primarily to get a person from point A to point B in a manner that is fast, frequent and reliable you should be fired from any job relating to transit, or at least ignored.

That's not Lienberger's point, however. His point is that the rationale for choosing what points A and B are (as well as what you develop there) is all about economic development.

Essentially, we don't just (or, we shouldn't just) build transportation infrastructure for the sake of itself, we build it to get something done. And that something is usually economic activity of some kind.

We don't just randomly pick points A and B. Instead, we have some sort of economic justification for why linking A and B is important.

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Elizabeth on February 11, 2013 at 6:37 pm

I appreciated Christopher Leinberger's straightforward and insightful comments on the panel. However, I disagree with his assertion that economic development is THE goal of a transportation system.

Land use and transportation (points A and B and the infrastructure connecting them) absolutely influence one another, and the District needs to consider the impacts of investments in both. But a transportation system exists to increase accessibility- enabling people to take advantage of social, educational, AND economic activities/opportunities in different locations by many modes. In any case, DDOT needs to make sure it clarifies exactly what DC residents think the goal of this effort should be.

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