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PUBLIC HEARING ON

**Bill 22-175 - “Transportation Benefits Equity  
Amendment Act of 2017”**

Before the Committee on Transportation and the Environments  
Councilmember Mary Cheh, Chairwoman

September 25, 2017 11:00AM

John A. Wilson Building, Room 412

**Testimony of Yesim Sayin Taylor**

**Executive Director**

**D.C. Policy Center**

Good morning, Chairwoman Cheh and the members of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment. My name is Yesim Sayin Taylor and I am the Executive Director of the D.C. Policy Center, an independent, nonpartisan think tank focused on the District's economy and demography. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on Bill 22-175, Transportation Benefits Equity Amendment Act of 2017.

Approximately a third of District employers offer free parking to their employees and another 18 percent offer subsidies for parking.<sup>1</sup> Bill 22-175 requires the same employers to offer the cash-equivalent of these parking benefits to all their workers, regardless of commute mode. And if employers choose not to deal with the cost or administrative burdens of following the bill's requirements, they could opt out at an annual penalty of \$1,200 per parking benefit they offer. The idea is to reduce the relative appeal of parking—and therefore driving—and incentivize workers to take the bus, the metro, or to walk or bike to work. The bill has good intentions (less congestion, better health, cleaner air), but social injustices will increase as a consequence.

The District places high value on cultivating neighborhoods where residents are close to public transportation or can walk or bike to work. The city built over 70 miles of bike lanes,<sup>2</sup> adopted a rigorous law<sup>3</sup> to protect bicyclists and improve pedestrian safety, implemented the Vision Zero program to reduce pedestrian fatalities, developed a long-term transportation plan with heavy emphasis on walking, biking, and living close to work, and even piloted a home purchase assistance program for people who will move into the city to live near their workplaces. Whether because of these programs or by sheer number of people who have moved into the central corridor, the city has become more

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate is based on a presentation by Marina Budimer, Increasing Access to Commuter Benefits, DDOT, presented on February 9, 2017 and available at <https://goo.gl/vU5ri9>

<sup>2</sup> Hennigan, G. (2016), 2015 in DC Bike Lanes, Washington Area Bicyclist Association <https://goo.gl/tP4jNz>

<sup>3</sup> Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Act of 2015. DC Law L21-0155 Effective from Oct 8, 2016 available at <http://lms.dccouncil.us/Legislation/B21-0335>

walkable and bikeable. One website ranks the District 7<sup>th</sup> among cities with a population of 500,000 or more both in walkability and bike-friendliness.

Investments in bike paths, or walkable communities with access to reliable transportation are good things. But without accompanying density increases along transportation corridors, these investments inadvertently create islands of gentrification and increase social inequities. Recent research supports the observation that environmental aspirations can overshadow social justice in the policy discourse.

For example, one study from the University of California, Berkley and the University of California, Los Angeles, commissioned by the California Air Resources Board and the California Environmental Protection Agency, finds that Sustainable Communities Strategies—that is, transportation policies that prioritize environmental impacts—in California have had negative social equity impacts: rising land costs in infill development areas have likely resulted in the displacement of low-income residents in San Francisco and LA.<sup>4</sup> Another study from Vancouver documents the path of gentrification along the SkyTrain stations.<sup>5</sup> While such results are not always present in all urban areas and across all modes of public transit,<sup>6</sup> they are more common than not.

There is already evidence that this has been happening in DC.<sup>7</sup> Housing in the District is costly, and costlier in walkable, bikeable communities. To wit, according to a recent publication on District, Measured, the blog of the D.C. Office of Revenue Analysis, housing prices have increased faster than median income since 2000. For 17 years now, the supply has not grown as fast as the demand, and median home prices are now five times the median income,

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<sup>4</sup> Chapple, et.al (2016)

<sup>5</sup> Jones, C. E. and Ley, D. (2016)

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Lee, B. (2017) and Barton and Gibbons (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein et al (2015)

despite rising incomes. That is, all residents—rich and poor—are spending a larger share of their incomes on housing.

Just think of what happened to housing prices along the 16<sup>th</sup> St. and Georgia Avenue corridors beginning Dupont Circle, all the way up to Petworth and Takoma. These are the neighborhoods that have experienced massive gentrification. They have seen some of the highest home price increases, a massive influx of population and displacement at the same time. And sustainable transportation policies have not offered any relief from these trends.

While correlation is not causation, data show us that where you find walkable, bikeable communities, you also find gentrification. At the D.C. Policy Center, we extensively studied the demographics of commute modes. We have found the following:

- **Those who walk and bike to work are clustered in the city center (an estimated 37,000), whereas only a small fraction of residents east of the Anacostia River does the same (an estimated 2000).** This is not a surprise—those who live in the city center are also close to job centers, while most residents east of the river work outside of their neighborhoods, and many work outside the city.
- **The heaviest use of buses and Metro occurs within the central corridor, where public transportation networks are densest.** Over 50,000 residents who live in downtown and the central corridor commute by metro or bus, compared to 19,000 in east of the river communities, and 15,000 in north east (comprising Wards 5 and parts of Ward 6). Communities to the west of Rock Creek Park also lag in public transportation usage because metro presence is scarce, but their commute times remain relatively short.
- **More residents east of the river drive to work than any other section of the city, despite low access to cars.** That is, east of the river residents

have few options to go to work because their employment opportunities are much further away from where they live.

- **Commute times are longest where incomes are lowest.** Over a third of the residents face commute times of 45 minutes or more in Wards 7 and 8, and over 60 percent commute 30 minutes or more.
- **Those who walk or bike to work tend to be younger and make higher incomes.** In 2015, the median age of D.C. residents in the workforce was 36, and median salary or wage income was \$50,000. People who walked to work were much younger (median age of 30) and earned slightly less than the median salary (\$46,000) than the typical D.C. resident. People who biked to work were also younger (median age 34), but earned more than the median salary (\$60,000). Those who took the bus, on the other hand, were at about the median age (35), but earned less (\$32,000). Those who drive earned slightly more than the median wage (\$55,000), but were older (median age, 41). If we were to adjust for age differences, we would find that those who walk and bike to work are richer than those who drive or take the bus. That is why they can afford to live close to where they work.

**Bill 22-175's impacts are unlikely to go beyond a small, concentrated group of residents and the workforce.** On a given day over 800,000 people commute to work in DC, and only 245,000 of them are DC residents. The rest commute from Virginia, Maryland and sometimes from distant places. Of these non-resident commuters (about 560,000), 60 percent drive, and they face median commute times of 35 to 45 minutes.<sup>8</sup> There is some element of convenience in these choices, but also an element of necessity: commute by car tend to be shorter than by metro (48 to 50 minutes), bus (47 to 60 minutes), or Commuter Rail (72 minutes). We don't know if these commuters have a reliable alternative. They could be working shifts that do not work well with

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<sup>8</sup> First estimate based on the 2016 State of the Commute study prepared by the COG, the latter based on the 1-year data summaries from ACS (2015).

public transportation or carpooling—many in health and hospitality sectors do. The bill would have little relevance to them—unless their employers decide to eliminate the benefit—and will do little to change their behavior.

The bill is also irrelevant to the world of reverse commuters. Approximately 90,000 DC residents work outside the city, and among these 62 percent drive (and 20 percent take the metro). And once again, these drivers are disproportionately in east of the river communities (22 percent of all drivers compared to 19 percent of all reverse commuters).

If we truly want to make D.C. a more walkable, bikeable, transit-friendly city, we should start with our broader housing and transportation policies. We should expand D.C.'s stock of affordable housing and promote dense, mixed-income developments along transit-accessible corridors; improve both Metro and bus networks so that they are an accessible and reliable option for all residents. And—in conjunction with these measures—we should continue to improve streets for pedestrians and cyclists, so that residents of all neighborhoods can safely access these healthier modes of transportation.

To be clear, bike lanes are good. Safe sidewalks are good. They are relatively cheap investments that reduce congestion and help improve health. But beyond investing in infrastructure and improving safety, D.C. Government does not need to favor those who walk or bike to work. And it should not favor those who drive either.

Transportation Benefits Equity Amendment Act of 2017 is well intentioned. But by prioritizing environmental benefits, it can amplify social injustices. Those who stand benefit the most from the bill—those who live close to their workplaces—have already won the income lottery. And the bill's benefits will elude those who have few options but to drive.

Thank you.

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