

Downtown Congestion Task Force Final Report

December 30, 2004



Downtown
Congestion
Task Force

Introduction

Downtown is the economic engine of the District. Downtown businesses generate 30% of DC's economic output and approximately 350,000 people work in the greater downtown each day. In the past five years alone, 50,000 new jobs have been added in downtown. Additionally, new investments in residential, entertainment, and cultural attractions are increasing the number of people who live downtown or come to visit. With this success comes new pressure on our transportation system. Maintaining the operation of the system is critical to ensuring economic competitiveness both downtown and throughout the District so that this growth can continue.

On May 6, 2004, Mayor Williams convened the Downtown Congestion Management Task Force to consider the problems of congestion in the downtown, develop and analyze a range of potential solutions, and present recommendations for action. With the goal of better managing congestion and supporting economic development, the Task Force has examined a wide range of possible responses to existing transportation conditions. Broadly categorized, the strategies recommended for implementation fall into three groups. There are quick fixes, such as the immediate hiring of Traffic Control Officers to better manage traffic at critical points in the transportation systems. There are long-term improvements, such as expanding transit capacity and optimizing the allocation of roadway space. Although the full benefits of these recommendations will not be felt immediately, planning and research to properly implement these kinds of improvements must begin in the short-term. Finally, there are system changes, some of which can be implemented within a relatively short time frame. These include the establishment of a new Office of Motor Carriers within the District Department of Transportation and the assumption of expanded transportation management duties by the existing Business Improvement Districts.

This report summarizes the proceedings of the Task Force to date and presents the recommendations presented at the Task Force meeting of November 22, 2004. A full list of participants can be found in the appendix.

Review of Progress to Date

Initial identification of problems and potential solutions

The work of the Task Force began with an assessment of current challenges and opportunities. Volpe Center staff interviewed individual members of the Task Force to get their opinions on transportation problems in downtown Washington and potential solutions. The Downtown DC Business Improvement District also conducted an online poll of its membership on these issues. Comments from the interviews and survey tended to highlight similar transportation problems. Among the most commonly cited were:

- Traffic delays caused by double-parking, improper loading and unloading, and blocked intersections
- A need for improved public transportation
- Inadequate short-term parking and delays caused by vehicles circling for parking
- Delays at traffic signals
- Delays caused by street closures and motorcades

In geographic terms, respondents to the online poll reported experiencing the biggest problems on Constitution and Connecticut avenues; 14th and 18th Streets; and H, I, K, and L Streets north of the White House.

At this stage, there was no overall consensus on how to approach the congestion problems downtown, but there were several potential strategies that were mentioned repeatedly:

- Stepped-up enforcement of traffic and parking rules, possibly using a contingent of civilian (non-sworn) traffic control officers
- Enhancements to the transit system, such as additional Metrorail cars, better customer information, light rail lines, dedicated bus lanes and signal priority, repairs to the escalators and elevators, and transit-oriented development around outlying Metro stations
- Improved conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists, including a more attractive walking environment and more bicycle lanes and facilities
- Elements of Intelligent Transportation Systems, particularly traffic signal synchronization
- Better traveler information, such as information on motorcades and festivals and general traffic updates
- Focusing more of the parking supply on short-term rather than long-term parking

Two other strategies frequently mentioned at this stage – transportation demand management and downtown congestion charging – generated strong opinions on both sides.

Committees

After the initial meeting, Task Force members were divided into topic-area committees in order to study relevant transportation issues in more detail and discuss potential strategies. The five committees were:

- Motor Carriers
- Parking
- Pricing
- Traffic Operations
- Transit

Each committee was co-chaired by a member of the Council of the District of Columbia and by a private sector Task Force member. Most committees met two or three times (some met 4 or 5 times) over the course of May and June to research and discuss potential strategies; the following chart provides a summary of the range of topic areas addressed within each committee.

Committee	Range of topics discussed at meetings
Motor Carriers	Developing better systems for accommodating deliveries and tour buses; citywide truck routes; streamlining construction permitting; re-thinking the Downtown Circulator; master plan for freight movement; adopting International Fuel Tax Agreement in D.C.; real-time information
Parking	Increasing short-term parking availability; changes to parking requirements in zoning code; extending hours of operation for private garages; shared parking; increasing enforcement of on-street parking; variable pricing at WMATA stations; improved parking information; dynamic pricing of on-street spaces
Pricing	Imposing peak-hour roadway charges downtown; developing regional HOT lane network; applying market-based pricing to on-street parking and loading zones; improving traveler information; promoting pay-as-you-drive car insurance and location efficient mortgages
Traffic Operations	Optimizing traffic flow using existing infrastructure; improving intersection control and incident response; increasing traffic/parking enforcement; managing construction-related closures; improving pedestrian safety; changing the allocation of roadway lanes; improving flow through signal timing and turn restrictions; re-opening E Street
Transit	Acquiring additional transit vehicles and maintenance facilities; Downtown Circulator; bus signal priority; K Street transitway and dedicated transit lanes; employer-based transit benefit programs; changes to parking pricing; improving traffic enforcement and intersection control; changing the regional funding mechanism for WMATA; research on new transit technologies and partnerships

As the chart shows, each committee looked at a wide range of potential solutions, including many that were innovative or controversial. Despite differences of opinion, each committee worked diligently to build consensus on a core set of recommendations

that could move forward. In preparation for the July meeting of the full Task Force, each committee also prioritized its recommendations and prepared summaries for presentation.

Though each committee worked independently, almost all of the recommendations that were forwarded by the committees fell under one of five themes, or major action areas:

- **Making public transportation a more efficient and attractive option**
- **Optimizing downtown traffic circulation patterns**
- **Improving the management of curbside space**
- **Improving the management of on- and off-street parking**
- **Enabling smarter travel choices**

July meeting

At the July meeting of the full Task Force, members were assigned to one of these five major action areas. Each working group discussed the proposals coming forward from the committees and discussed whether to approve and/or modify them. In the process, they also noted recommendations that were potentially complementary or contradictory, worked to resolve any incongruities, and combined overlapping recommendations into a consolidated package of strategies. (A few recommendations were re-grouped to better match their topic).

November meeting

The Task Force's work and final recommendations were formally presented to the Mayor at the November meeting. Two other elected officials on the Task Force – Carol Schwartz of the Council of the District of Columbia and Eleanor Holmes Norton of the U.S. House of Representatives – were also present for a briefing on the recommendations. The Task Force's final recommendations are summarized in the charts beginning on Page 8, and presented in more detail in the narrative beginning on Page 13.

Next Steps

Mayor Williams has already begun to plan for the implementation of a number of the near-term recommendations, including posting intersection control aides at key downtown locations and eliminating free parking at DC government agencies. The Mayor will also be working with the DC Council to develop legislation allowing DDOT to institute market-based pricing at curbside loading zones and parking spaces. A package of legislative changes will be proposed in order to provide for implementation of recommendations.

Data collection and “best practices” research are also ongoing in support of some of the longer-term recommendations, including work to study how downtown circulation patterns and lane usage can be improved. Over the longer term, implementing the recommendations will require a mixture of capital investment (particularly for transit) and institutional changes (e.g. with the establishment of an Office of Motor Carriers).

An annual transportation report may be an appropriate method of tracking the progress of the recommendations found within this report and the larger issues they are intended to address.