Coalition for Smarter Growth
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Testimony before the

Hon. Mary M. Cheh,
Chair, Committee on the Environment, Public Works, and Transportation

Regarding the Public Oversight Roundtable on Parking in the District

By Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
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Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth (CSG). The Coalition for Smarter Growth is the leading organization working locally in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region dedicated to making the case for smart growth. Our mission is to promote walkable, inclusive, and transit-oriented communities, and the land use and transportation policies and investments needed to make those communities flourish.

We want to commend this committee and the Mayor for advancing a commuter benefits provision in the Sustainable DC Act which would allow workers to opt for pre-tax transit commute benefits or enable workers to receive a transit rather than parking commute benefit offered by his or her employer. We are eager to continue to work with the committee to refine this bill to cover most employers since compliance does not cost the employer anything, and to add a "parking cashout" provision which gives walk and bicycle commuters the option to cashout a parking subsidy if one is provided by the employer.

Regarding on-street parking – this mains an area where the city has experimented but not systematically provided a comprehensive updated approach. With more effective management of the District's on-street vehicle parking space we can foster quality neighborhoods, reduce congestion and air pollution, and enhance housing affordability. As a participant in the 2003 Mayor Williams' Parking Task Force, I continue to support many of the reforms that were proposed in Task Force Report, including the recommendation "that parking is market priced for all users." This idea also surfaced as part of the Parking Think Tanks conducted by DDOT in 2013. We still need to move forward in this direction – price parking so that supply equals demand. Where supply is ample, prices will be low. Where demand is high, price should reflect that scarcity.

In recent years there have been a variety of bills attempting to tweak some aspect of the Residential Parking Permit (RPP) program. Rather than create a patchwork of rules and exceptions, we should create as simple a system as we can to address as many needs as we can. We have come to expect RPP to do many things it was not designed to do, so it is a good time to revise it. We need to do this in a way that supports broader goals for our neighborhoods of reducing traffic and air pollution caused by drivers hunting for undervalued parking spaces. RRP policy should also reinforce the city's competitive advantage of affordable transportation choices – transit, walking, bicycling, carsharing, taxi cabs, and the growing array of smartphone enabled services. Public street parking management is also important

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because it affects housing affordability through misguided policies and pressure to build more costly off-parking than needed.

While parking is often perceived as something that is free, any developer will tell you that building a parking space has a very real cost – easily costing $50,000 for a parking space in an underground garage. Thus in neighborhoods with high demand, street parking should be managed to prioritize users, use market pricing to give consumers information about the trade off of paying for off-street parking, searching for on-street parking, or arriving by another mode.

Visitor Passes

RPP was designed to reserve public street parking in residential neighborhoods for residents near transit-served areas at a nominal fee. DDOT has experimented with visitor passes, and also with on-street management that reserves one side of the street for RPP holders only, with no 2 hour free time. Both these approaches fail to recognize that not valuing street through pricing will perpetuate perceptions that for some people parking should be free, even in high demand areas. Furthermore, residents complain that they'd like more flexibility for visitor parking by obtaining several visitor passes for a gathering of a number of people. A simple booklet of multiple one day passes or passes printed from a website can address all these residents' needs. Such a system can provide residents with access to multiple visitor passes for a modest daily rate, perhaps $5 a day, or the cost of a typical roundtrip on transit. Residents could receive a set of 25 or so for free, and have additional passes cost the standard rate. Resident visitor passes can be used by residents for anything – contractors, plumbers, babysitters, house cleaners, mothers-in-law. This approach eliminates the need to give special passes to any one group of drivers.

Visitor passes for public service workers in residential neighborhoods

In the case of public service employees who work in our neighborhoods, such as firefighters, police officers and school teachers, we suggest that they be given access to daily or monthly visitor passes for the same rate -- $5 a day or the cost of a roundtrip on transit. Revenues from this program could be used to discount transit passes for other public workers who opt to take transit to work. What's important is to not give parking for free. If we do, we strongly discourage commuters from considering transit. Giving parking privileges for free is also unfair to the worker who does not have car to drive and must arrive by transit – paying the fare both ways. Since a transit rider pays every time he or she rides, we think a similar approach should be used for parking with daily passes. That way a worker may drive one day and ride transit the next, saving money.

Daytime vs. evening competition for on-street parking

In most cases, daytime parking demand is lower than evening parking demand in residential neighborhoods. Thus providing a more flexible approach to non-resident users is appropriate, and in most cases will not impinge on the availability of street parking for residents. Allowing city workers serving our neighborhoods to buy passes is sensible. Shrinking RPP zones or creating true transit zones to disallow intra-ward commuting to Metro stations would be one reform that will relieve parking demand during the day in neighborhoods close to Metro stations.

Evening demand for street parking is primarily caused by visitors who are parking in neighborhoods to visit restaurants or entertainment. Managing evening parking demand can be done by pricing all the curbspace for non-residents using a pay by phone system or occasional multi-space meters. It's not enough to extend RPP hours of enforcement, it's better to use pricing to manage availability and shift the incentive to paying for off-street parking, arrival by transit or taxi rather than hunting for a free but scarce on-street space. This approach – that all visitors pay -- should simplify enforcement.

Reforming parking requirements in the zoning code

One of the most important revisions to our city's 1958 zoning code that we hope to adopt in the next six months is significantly reducing parking requirements in areas well served by transit. Since 2008, we've had numerous workgroup meetings, two rounds of Zoning Commission hearings, and extensive public outreach discussing these parking policy issues. We know that building too much off-street parking is common. One of the drivers of overparking is inappropriate zoning requirements. Forcing in too much parking not only makes housing more expensive, it also encourages car ownership, and with it more traffic, and undermines transit use.

Demand for off-street parking, which is costly (about $200 per month), is weakly linked to on-street parking through RPP, which is under $3 per month. Despite the seemingly high price of off-street parking, this price rarely covers the actual cost to build and maintain a parking space. This means everyone is paying for the cost of providing parking, whether or not you own a car.

During the debate over updating our 1958 zoning code, several people have expressed concern about competition for on-street parking. This is the conflict point, not zoning rules about off-street parking. We ask the committee to support the reforms to the zoning code to allow less parking where less is needed, and to focus on the real contested issue: how we manage and price public street parking for private vehicles.

In the future, RPP should move to a more demand-based approach using pricing. In high demand neighborhoods, RPP privileges should cost more – enough to match demand with supply. A great way to use additional revenue can be to provide transit discounts to low income residents or school children in the neighborhood.

Thank you for your consideration.