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BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM AND OVERSIGHT

HEARING ON THE FEDERAL RESPONSE TO
THE IMPACTS ON THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA OF
THE CLOSING OF A PORTION OF PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE

JUNE 7, 1996

On behalf of the Department of Transportation, I am pleased to participate in this hearing to evaluate the impact on the District of Columbia (D.C.) of the traffic restrictions imposed on Pennsylvania Avenue in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. As an agency, we know all too well the loss that can be experienced as a result of a terrorist attack. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) lost eleven of the 168 Federal employees that perished on that tragic day.

The FHWA's Relationship with the District of Columbia

Consistent with the Clinton Administration's pledge to be a good neighbor to D.C. and consistent with the FHWA's commitment to be a partner with the District, I am pleased that over the last three and a half years we have been able to work very closely with the city to advance significant construction and reconstruction projects on major traffic routes. This hearing is timely especially in view of our intensified efforts over the past year to reinforce the District's infrastructure:

- * We provided the D.C. government with technical assistance and support which were crucial to Congressional passage of legislation introduced by Congresswoman Norton. The District of Columbia Emergency Highway Relief Act of 1995 granted D.C. a waiver from the local matching share normally required of the recipients of Federal-aid highway funds.
- * In order to help the city cope with current D.C. Department of Public Works (DCDPW) funding and staffing problems, we have worked proactively with the D.C. government and have provided program delivery assistance aimed at resolving these difficulties.
- * We have performed a study of the longer term needs of the DCDPW in the areas of staffing and administrative procedures in an effort to enhance the project delivery process in the District.
- * Just yesterday, I witnessed the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement by the D.C. government, the D.C. Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority (the Control Board), and the FHWA that is designed to streamline the Federal-aid highway contracts award process in D.C. This agreement eliminates many of the reviews and approvals previously required, and consequently it will greatly decrease the time needed to process Federal-aid highway contract awards. Delayed delivery of contract awards impacts both the cost and timely completion of needed highway projects.
- * As a part of my personal review of the National Highway System, I made an extensive road trip throughout D.C. on Thursday May 25th, 1995. Along with a group of District of Columbia representatives, I toured active and proposed Federal-aid highway projects. The agenda included stops at the Sousa Bridge construction project, the New York

Avenue development corridor, the Barney Circle Freeway Modification Project, and the National Mall Monument program. We discussed many issues during this tour including the FHWA's efforts to help the D.C. government with their fiscal crisis, the status of the District's bridge replacement program, and the importance of a viable transportation system (including a complete Interstate System) to the District's economic future.

In light of these past endeavors by the FHWA to assist the District in resolving traffic-related problems and our plans to aid the city in the coming year, the transportation situation in the District of Columbia is a lot brighter than it would otherwise have been.

It was in the same spirit of cooperation with the District that the FHWA offered to help the city solve traffic problems resulting from vehicular access restrictions around the White House. Less than a week after the Treasury Department's action to restrict traffic, the FHWA authorized the use of \$165,000 in Federal-aid funds by the DCDPW to modify District streets as a means of improving traffic flow. These Federal funds covered 100% of the cost of programming traffic signals and installing traffic signal hardware, signs, and pavement markings to convert H and I Streets into a one-way couple, and to convert 15th Street into a one-way street between E and K Streets.

Consistent with the direction of this Subcommittee and at the request of the City Council, the FHWA contracted with Barton-Aschman Associates to undertake a comprehensive traffic and economic study of the affected area in order to further facilitate a smooth transition to the new traffic patterns. An executive summary of the draft report is attached to my testimony, and we have provided the Subcommittee with copies of the full draft report. Barton-Aschman collected and analyzed data concerning the traffic conditions existing prior and subsequent to the imposition

of these traffic restrictions and street modifications. The FHWA managed the contract and monitored the consultant's progress during data collection and analysis. Recently, the FHWA initiated consultations with D.C. transportation officials on the results of the study delineated in a draft report. We will work with the city to determine which of the mitigation measures recommended by the consultant in the draft report should be implemented.

We have also volunteered technical assistance to the Treasury Department in preparing an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate whether any significant adverse effects on the environment resulted from the traffic restrictions and street modifications. Ordinarily, the restriction of vehicular traffic on a street does not warrant the development of an environmental assessment, but because of the unusual circumstances which led to this action and the controversy surrounding it, the Council on Environmental Quality requested that an EA be prepared. The FHWA will use the data and analysis developed in the course of the traffic and economic study for the assessment of impacts for purposes of the EA.

Draft Report on Transportation Conditions in the Vicinity of the White House

Reasons for Compiling the Report

The purposes of the study underlying the draft report were to gather data to determine the performance of the street system within the study area, to identify transportation improvements which could be implemented immediately to mitigate the impact of the traffic restrictions and street modifications, and to identify other transportation problems that will require more extensive analysis or more long-term solutions.

Scope of the Draft Report

The consultant hired by the FHWA to conduct this study assessed the effects of not only

the traffic restrictions on Pennsylvania Avenue and westbound E Street, but also the effects of the DCDPW street modifications carried out in response to these restrictions (e.g. conversion of H and I Streets to a one-way couple and conversion of 15th Street to a one-way northbound route). The study used three types of traffic analysis: comparison of traffic volumes before and after the restrictions were imposed, travel-time speed-and-delay studies, and assessment of broader shifts in traffic using a regional traffic model.

In conducting this study, the consultant examined the impacts of these traffic restrictions on traffic congestion, traffic patterns, pedestrian-vehicle conflicts, and the circuitousness of circulation. The consultant also assessed the changes made in the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA's) Metrobus operations in the study area. The impacts on local businesses due to the loss of curb parking and loading zones, the loss of direct vehicular access, and the increased circuitousness of access were studied. In addition, the consultant evaluated the effects of this traffic restriction on the routing and parking of tour buses and the access of tourists to major attractions in the vicinity of the White House.

Conclusions in the Draft Report

As to the impact on traffic, the draft report includes some general conclusions about traffic shifts before and after implementation of the traffic restrictions, but the consultant could not isolate the **effects** of these restrictions more specifically due to a lack of comprehensive data on the pre-existing level of traffic. While recognizing that serious congestion existed prior to the action, the analysis nonetheless revealed a substantial increase in traffic on many of the streets around the White House. It also indicated that on other streets in the study area there had been no change or a decrease in traffic. Most significantly, the study indicated that the traffic shifts had

been limited to the immediate vicinity of the White House (on Constitution Avenue and H, I, and K Streets) and that any effects on the surrounding area were negligible: the use of a regional traffic model illustrated that there were no broader shifts in traffic as a result of the action.

As to the impact on the routing and patronage of Metrobuses, the draft report includes an assessment, provided by WMATA, of the operational changes necessitated by the traffic restrictions around the White House. These changes include additional running times for bus routes, physical changes made to the routes, and redistribution of buses to accommodate the traffic restrictions and street modifications.

The great majority of tourists had a neutral or positive reaction to the restriction of vehicular traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, and over 90 percent reported that it would not affect their decision to return to the area. Tour bus operators reported no loss of income as a result of these traffic restrictions. However, these operators have had to park their tour buses on the more commercial streets in the vicinity of the White House, and this response to the traffic restrictions on Pennsylvania Avenue has undoubtedly had an impact on local traffic congestion and access to local businesses. The FHWA will work with the D.C. government and the tour bus operators to develop a mutually agreeable solution to this situation.

The effects on local businesses were extremely difficult to quantify. Riggs Bank is the only business entity located on Pennsylvania Avenue itself, and the three parking spaces in front of it were maintained in order to lessen the impact of the traffic restrictions. Moreover, reasonable alternative means of accessing this bank via New York Avenue and 15th Street continue to exist. As to businesses on the surrounding streets, although many of these merchants reported that their businesses had been adversely affected, it was impossible to distinguish the effect of these traffic

restrictions and modifications from other factors, such as an unusually harsh winter, two Federal government shutdowns, and overall economic trends. Nonetheless, the study did show that these traffic restrictions resulted in a loss of 49 metered parking spaces in the vicinity of the White House. To offset this loss and lessen the impact on area businesses, however, the study also identified nineteen locations within the area where metered parking could be installed.

Recommendations in the Draft Report

The draft report includes a series of recommendations proposed by the consultant regarding ways to improve traffic operations in the study area. These recommendations fall into three categories: immediate-action items, longer-term transportation improvement measures, and the development of a comprehensive transportation needs assessment for the District. Immediate action items include restriping intersections to allow passage of more traffic, using a traffic signal optimization model to maximize the efficiency of the existing intersection system, reconfiguring raised islands for more efficient operations, and restoring traffic along westbound E Street. Possible longer-term actions include the conversion of 14th and 15th Streets to a one-way couple and construction of a tunnel to restore westbound traffic to E Street. The comprehensive analysis of the overall traffic needs of the District's downtown core could be carried out in the near future to identify further actions to ease congestion in the city.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to reiterate the FHWA's continued commitment to assist the District in any way we can to improve traffic operations in the city.

- * In the coming months, we will supply all the technical assistance needed to complete an environmental assessment of the traffic restrictions and street modifications in the vicinity

of the White House.

- * We will continue the consultation process begun with the District to determine which of the mitigation measures recommended in the draft report should be implemented.
- * We will assist the District in evaluating possible funding mechanisms and determining which of these funding sources would be most appropriate for each of the mitigation measures being considered.
- * I also pledge the support of the FHWA staff to advance project implementation aimed at enhancing traffic flow around the White House once appropriate mitigation measures are determined and funding sources and amounts are agreed upon.
- * We stand ready to initiate, after consultation with the D.C. government, a comprehensive study of the overall traffic needs of the city.
- * We will continue to assist the District in implementing overarching reforms of the DCDPW's program delivery processes. Our efforts in this regard will be tied to the results of the study we conducted of the longer-term needs of the DCDPW and the Memorandum of Agreement signed yesterday through which we established a pilot program providing for the expeditious award of Federal-aid highway contracts while assuring quality and cost competitive highway contracting within the District.
- * I would also just like to note the recent reports that D.C. is in the midst of an economic revival. We, at FHWA, naturally understand how crucial efficient transportation systems are to the economic vitality of an area. Thus, we have been and will continue to work with the D.C. government, this Subcommittee, other Federal agencies, and the private sector to enhance the major gateway corridors to the city.

Thank you for the opportunity to report on our efforts. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.