

June 1, 2011

To: Mayor and Council

From: Traffic and Transportation Commission

Subject: Reducing Pedestrian Fatalities

After three pedestrian fatalities on Rockville Pike last fall, the Traffic and Transportation Commission established a Pedestrian Safety Subcommittee to review pedestrian accidents and to make recommendations to improve pedestrian safety generally. The Subcommittee has concluded its work, and on May 24, the full commission unanimously moved to send the following observations and recommendations to the Mayor and Council. Our most important and troubling observation is an ongoing pattern of failures to anticipate and preempt danger to pedestrians, with pedestrian safety deficiencies not given adequate consideration until after pedestrian fatalities. We believe that if a change is worth making after a pedestrian is killed, it is worth making before a pedestrian is killed.

In particular, it is essential for city staff to proactively and expeditiously respond to dangerous pedestrian situations in all instances. To accomplish this we recommend that (1) the city develop an effective system to ensure that non-functional street lights and other dangerous situations are noted by city staff on the roads at night and expeditiously reported and repaired; (2) that observations made in police investigations and accident reports are expeditiously communicated to relevant city staff outside the police department, even before the investigation is complete, so that appropriate measures can be taken; (3) that the operations and engineering of Rockville's more urban intersections in the transit oriented communities near the three Rockville Metro stations reflect their increasingly urban nature, and prioritize safe and efficient pedestrian motion accordingly; (4) that cross-walk locations, bus stop locations, pedestrian signal settings and other engineering features of the road network are judged by the observed behavior of the actual pedestrians using them, rather than by a theoretical capacity to be used safely.

To elaborate slightly on the basis for these findings, we would like to give an account of a meeting that our Subcommittee, together with Rockville Transportation staff, had with Montgomery County traffic engineering on January 11th. Our meeting was quite frustrating, but also very revealing. We have been long concerned that the signalized intersections in the most urban sections of Rockville Pike are not operated in a safe manner. To make this discussion more concrete, we have focused on one intersection, at King Farm and 355, as an example. Based on extensive observations by Commissioner Oberg and Rockville city staff, the members of the Subcommittee have concluded that an automatic pedestrian crossing phase could enhance pedestrian safety. The County staff listened to our concerns, but were unwilling to even investigate whether a different signal operation would enhance safety. Instead they insisted that any unsafe crossings were the result of unsafe and unlawful behavior on the part of the pedestrians, and that the only appropriate response was education and enforcement on the part of the City of Rockville. They asserted that the changes we suggested would have the potential to delay traffic on 355, although when we suggested collecting evidence that these delays were real and substantial, they insisted that this was not necessary, and that no data collected would persuade them to change their position or revise the operation of the signal.

County transportation staff stated quite directly that they would not take any responsibility for what happened to pedestrians who failed to avail themselves of the available systems (specifically push-button

activated crosswalks), regardless of how inconvenient or infrequently utilized these systems were. We all support enforcement and education as a complement to well-engineered intersections, but when the vast majority of pedestrians cross in an unsafe manner, we think all measures should be given appropriate consideration to prevent future accidents and fatalities, including providing pedestrians time and information to cross safely at every cycle of the intersection, particularly at peak pedestrian hours. Our transit oriented communities at King Farm, Town Center and Twinbrook have substantial pedestrian traffic, and all of our development plans call for pedestrian transit to increase substantially. In urban environments like these, including not just DC, but also Bethesda, automatic pedestrian phases are routinely utilized. Because of the proximity of the Rockville Pike and the Metro line, we simply cannot achieve the safe multi-modal Rockville we all seek without safe efficient crossing operations of the Rockville Pike in these urban transit oriented centers.

The tragic death of the NIH scientist on 355 south of Edmonston Drive was clearly the result, at least in part, of illegal and unsafe behavior on the part of the victim, who was not inside a crosswalk when she was hit. The scientist was new to our city, and was following the example of many other riders of the bus in crossing as she did, without a cross-walk in a poorly lit section of the road. Crossing in this manner was routine and predictable given a crossing infrastructure inconvenient and ill-suited to the pedestrian users of the roadway. After her death the bus stop was relocated to make it more convenient and likely that pedestrians will use a crosswalk at a signalized intersection. Other changes are being made to late night operation of pedestrian signals near metro stations in response to the deaths near the White Flint metro station. We hope other safety problems can be addressed before the next fatality.

We need to make sure pedestrian safety is given substantial consideration in the design and operation of intersections on Rockville Pike, so that we avoid rather than react to the next tragic fatality. We hope the Mayor and Council will communicate to City and County staff the importance of designing intersections which, together with education and enforcement, protect pedestrians in fact, and not just in theory. The safety of the citizens of the city and the county is too important to sacrifice to narrow jurisdictional approaches.