TESTIMONY

of

Doreen Campbell
Vice Chair, Zero Waste Committee
Sierra Club - DC Chapter

before the

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Budget Oversight Hearing for the Department of Public Works
April 26, 2017
John A. Wilson Building Room 412

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Department of Public Works Fiscal Year 2018 budget. My name is Doreen Campbell, and I am the vice chair of the Zero Waste Committee of the Sierra Club’s Washington, DC Chapter. Our Chapter represents around 10,000 District residents, including both dues-paying members and supporters, who care about the natural environment and our urban ecology. The Chapter’s Zero Waste Committee works to move DC toward zero waste – a future where the norm involves reduction, reuse, recycling, and composting as opposed to incineration or landfilling.

The appointment of Christopher Shorter as the director of DPW marked a new era at the agency. Director Shorter and his staff at the Office of Waste Diversion have made significant strides in increasing transparency, maintaining a dialogue with the environmental and public health community, and being open to increasing DC’s waste diversion rate. We sincerely appreciate these efforts as we recently learned that the District’s residential diversion rate is currently embarrassingly low 21 percent. The enhanced DPW leadership combined with the requirements and authority provided by the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act could go a long way in achieving a diversion rate of at least 80%, the target for the required zero waste plan (and even by the deadline of 2032 as per the Sustainable DC Plan).

Two weeks ago, there was a DC Environmental Network/DPW briefing on the proposed Fiscal Year 2018 budget for DPW. During this briefing, Director Shorter explained that the current version of the FY2018 budget, relative to current funding levels, would cut two staff positions in the Office of Waste Diversion and eliminate “nonpersonal service dollars” for this office.

We oppose these cuts. Ensuring these the two staff positions are restored is critical for the Office of Waste Diversion to have the capacity they need to accomplish DC’s waste diversion goals.
Meanwhile, nonpersonal funding pays for very important services provided by DPW including education-related activities and contracts to research significant waste issues. Director Shorter assured people in attendance they would be leveraging the team in the Solid Waste Education and Enforcement Program, or SWEEP, to ensure that the Office of Waste Diversion’s responsibilities are met. However, it is not clear to us that there will be enough leeway in SWEEP’s budget to permit the Office of Waste Diversion to fulfill its mandates.

As the years pass and the Office of Waste Diversion is required by the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act to take on more, not fewer, responsibilities, or as they choose to exercise the authority provided in the law, we believe that now is the time to ramp up funding for the Office of Waste Diversion. For example, implementing a city-wide composting program is a massive undertaking, but a necessary step on the way to an 80% diversion rate. The Office of Waste Diversion is ready for this, but they need adequate resources – for both funding and staff. The environmental community is eager to see their plans for a comprehensive composting system and urges DPW to release the feasibility and progress study ASAP.

Sierra Club and others also believe that now is the perfect time to begin exploring a “Save As You Throw” program. Under such a program, residents are charged for trash by the amount they throw out, instead of the current, inequitable system whereby fees are not linked to trash volume, but rather embedded in city taxes.

We request that the DC Council include funding for a Save As You Throw pilot in the Budget Support Act so that DPW can issue an RFP and oversee the pilot in 2018. A pilot would evaluate how to tailor SAYT to DC in a way that reflects the city’s unique characteristics, like income and homeownership levels. The pilot would also address the risk that people would perceive this as an additional tax. Restoring the two staff positions that were cut in the proposed budget would provide the capacity necessary to work on this issue, as well as other initiatives that will help ensure that DC meets its 80 percent waste reduction goals.

In summary, we request that the DC Council restore the funding for nonpersonal services and the two staff positions in the FY2018 budget, and that funding be set aside for a Save As You Throw pilot.

Thank you very much for your time.

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