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Reconsider heavy traffic fines

Resolved, that ANC1D advises the District Department of Transportation to reconsider the heavy fines proposed in the rulemaking published December 11, 2015, and advises the Council of the District of Columbia to consider the possibility of income-adjusted traffic fines.

Why: The notion behind these increased fines is that deterrence will be enhanced. That supposes that drivers are currently willfully violating traffic regulations because they are unafraid of the moving-violation fines that would follow, should their violation be ticketed. In fact, deterrence is a function of the likelihood of a fine, not the magnitude of the fine. A fifty-dollar fine for violating a "no turn on red" sign would be ample deterrent, if the probability of the ticket and fine were not, as it is now, very low. Very few people consider a fifty-dollar fine negligible, and are undeterred only because they would not be bothered by such a fine.

But some drivers will be ticketed, and fined, however rarely and haphazardly. Some drivers subject to tickets and fines will come from low-income families where a heavy fine, whether fifty dollars or two hundred dollars, will be a major hit to their budgets. Fifty dollars is surely deterrence enough; two hundred dollars, for low-income families, is the rent money, it's food on the table, it's clothing for the children. The supposed enhanced deterrence of the heavier fine is surely outweighed by the hardship imposed, not only on the offending driver, but his family.

The higher fines will therefore result in little or no improvement in driver behavior, and yet will inflict serious hardships on the families of low-income drivers who happen to be ticketed.

ANC1D advises that moving-violation fines be adjusted according to the ability of the offender to afford the fine, as is done in some European countries. If the system cannot be revised to incorporate such adjustability for equitable punishment for an offense, then the higher fines proposed by DDOT should be rolled back to levels which, however low, will remain deterrents. Nobody likes paying a traffic fine, however small, and there is no validity to the notion that drivers disregard traffic regulations because they won't be bothered by the fine.

Passed by 5 to 0 vote at the legally noticed, public meeting of ANC1D on March 22, 2016, with a quorum present. Voting "yes": Commissioners Agbro, Griffiths, Rivas, McKay, Hoey. A quorum for this commission is three; five commissioners were present.