

**Testimony of Janet Sharp, member of the
People for Fairness Coalition (PFFC) Downtown DC Public Restroom Initiative
at the January 10, 2018 Hearing on Bill 22-0223 chaired by the
Committee on Transportation and Environment**

Committee Chair Cheh, members of the Committee on Transportation & Environment,

Good morning, my name is Janet Sharp. I am a member of the PFFC Downtown DC Public Restroom Initiative whose work has inspired and guided the contents of this Bill. I would like to focus my testimony on two topics: (1) the challenges that women experience when they have to urgently go to the restroom; and (2) What we have learned from our research on restroom availability in downtown areas of the District.

Challenges experienced by women when nature calls

There are a number of reasons why having ready access to a clean, safe public restroom is important to women. First of all, if a woman is on her period, and urgently has to go, she needs a place nearby where she can go to the bathroom in safety. Second, pregnant women have to go more often than those who are not because of the pressure that the baby is putting on the woman's bladder. Third, as my doctor told me, all women who try to hold their urine risk urinary tract infections which in some cases can lead to kidney failure. Fourth, it is more difficult for a homeless woman to find a place to go to the bathroom in the open if she has no other option whereas men have much less difficulty. Finally, men sleeping on the streets have an easier time when they have to urinate at night because they can do it in a bottle. For women, this is nearly impossible.

What we have learned from our research on restroom availability in downtown DC

When we prepared to launch our Initiative over 3 years ago, in addition to learning about lessons learned and best practices in other cities, we decided that while, we already knew that DC had limited access to public restrooms, for credibility we needed to do research on this topic. Our research focused on the extent to which private facilities let people who aren't patrons use their restrooms and the availability of public restrooms.

For the first we chose five areas of the District that meet two criteria: a lot of pedestrian traffic and a relatively large homeless population: Dupont Circle, Gallery Place, Georgetown, Columbia Heights, and K St between 13th and 17th streets. Between January and March of 2015 we visited 85 private facilities in these five areas to see if their restrooms were open to the public and, if they were, whether they were clean and safe. We followed up visiting the same facilities in 2016 and 2017 to see how many were still open to the public. For the second, we did a comprehensive internet search, followed by visits, to identify public restrooms.

This is what we found: Of the 85 facilities that we visited in 2015, 43 (51%) opened their restrooms to everyone. When a year later, we visited the 43 that provided restroom access in 2015, we found that the number had dropped to 28 (33%). When we went back in Spring of 2017 to the 28 facilities that allowed the public to use their restroom, we found that only 11

(13%) allowed everyone to use their restrooms. This, as you will see, in other testimonies, contrasts sharply with what one finds in European capitals.

Our internet search, followed by site visits, to identify public restrooms revealed that in downtown DC there were only 5 public restrooms off the Mall that are open during the day and for limited hours: the National Portrait Gallery and the National Building Museum in the Gallery Place area; and three near the White House: Lafayette Park, the White House Visitors Center and the Ellipse. None had signs to tell you where they were. To our surprise, we found only 3 public restrooms that are open 24/7 in all of Washington DC: Union Station and the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. When you are out and about late at night in areas like Dupont Circle and Georgetown and urgently have to go you will have to walk a long distance.

In closing, I urge the Committee on Transportation & Environment to pass Bill 22-0223, Public Restroom Facilities Installation and Promotion Act of 2017 so that steps can be taken by the City to identify locations for clean, safe, available public restrooms. Having ready access to a clean, safe public restroom is a matter of human dignity. It is also critical for personal and public health.

Thank you.