

Testimony at hearing on Events DC

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Committee Chair Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, Events DC President and CEO O'Dell

Something in the vicinity of 22 million tourists are estimated to have visited Washington, DC in 2016 and if this trend holds, the 2017 statistics will show slightly more. As a tour guide in the District of Columbia I was able to interact with perhaps a thousand of them.

It's hard to make generalities about these visitors. Some come to see the Memorials and Museums and barely step off the Mall. Others are excited to sample some of the energy of living in a dynamic city. I, myself, deal largely with students, here to connect their abstract classroom material with the physical reality of American history and government. Meanwhile we have tourists that don't speak a bit of English. Stereotypes falter when we try to pigeonhole our visitors.

Yet every single one of them has one thing in common. Over 22 million visitors will have to pee in the District of Columbia. The overwhelmingly most common question I get is not who this statue is or who the architect of that building was; it's "where is the bathroom?"

They will pee if we make the experience easy for them. They will pee it if we make it difficult. It's going to happen, one way or another.

Chances are, they will not remember that experience. Most of us don't. But they will if the bathrooms are hard to find. They will remember if their child had an accident searching for one. They will remember if it's unclean or poorly maintained. They will remember if the sign on the door says "no public restrooms." This will shape their experience and I know this, because the first person they tell is their tour guide.

The next, of course, is their friends and family. With the wonder of social media, this often even happens before they leave town. The individual visitor's experience has never been so important to a destination's reputation as it is right now.

So why not embrace this? The other time visitors will remember an experience is if it's unique in a positive way.

Take the example of our bikeshare system. Its underlying purpose isn't flashy; it's simply an attempt to solve short distance point to point transportation issues in a dense urban fabric. It's not exactly a topic that was gripping to eighth graders years ago. I spent little or no time discussing it in a three or four day tour.

But now, with red bikes all over town, they're entranced. The bikes are bright, dare I say garish, and prominently located. I get questions routinely. It's a selling point, and kids and even adults trapped in car dependent suburbs envy the freedom of our bikeshare system users. Not because it blends in, but because it doesn't.

Let's do this with public restrooms. Visitors want a taste of the exotic. They travel to see new things.

And as a frequent traveler myself, and an even more frequent beer and coffee drinker, I can attest that MOST American cities make it difficult to find a restroom. It's perhaps a sad state of affairs that clean, functioning public restrooms are exotic in today's America, but that's also an opportunity for us to stand out.

There are more important reasons to support public restrooms. Reasons of social equity and our duty to assist all of our residents. But we can also see this as an opportunity to enhance the visitor experience in a memorable way.

Daniel Burnham, famous architect and daily urinator, told us to "make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men's blood." Sadly, the wonderful public restrooms he built in Union Station have not survived intact but that's no reason not to heed his advice.

In closing, I request that the Council of the Whole find \$336,000 in its FY 2020 markup to fund the first year of the public restroom pilots provided for under Bill 22-223, Public Restrooms Installation & Promotion Act, soon to become law. We were disappointed that Mayor Bowser did not include the \$336,000 needed for first year funding.

If the DC Council is not able to identify these funds, this law guiding will remain on the books with no action taken.