



ANACOSTIA WATERSHED SOCIETY

Christopher E.
Williams
President/CEO

June 18, 2024

Delivered via email

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Geoff Rankin
Chair

Neil Lang
Vice Chair

Ken Williams
Treasurer

Danielle Baussan
Secretary

Jim Connolly

Elissa Feldman

Melissa Ho, Ph.D.

Jayant Kairam

Tracey Patillo
Johnson, MPP

Lee Poston

Nigel Stephens

Michael Tilchin

*Founder and
Honorary Member*
Robert E. Boone

Re: June 29, 2024 “Splash” event and a swimmable Anacostia River

Richard Jackson, Director
DC Department of Energy and Environment
1200 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

Thennie Freeman, Director
DC Department of Parks and Recreation
1275 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Director Jackson and Director Freeman:

On Saturday, June 29, Anacostia Riverkeeper will host a “Splash” event, the first permitted swim event in the Anacostia River for the general public in over 50 years. The event marks a significant milestone in the recovery of the Anacostia River. All the many individuals, agencies, and organizations that have contributed to the dramatic improvements to water quality in the Anacostia River that have made this event possible should be congratulated for this tremendous progress. On behalf of the Anacostia Watershed Society, I wish Anacostia Riverkeeper and the DC Department of Energy & Environment (DOEE) great success on June 29, and I will be there to join the celebration.

Founded in 1989, AWS is dedicated to protecting and restoring the Anacostia river and its watershed for all who live here and for future generations. Central to that mission is restoration of the water quality of the Anacostia River, and for 35 years we have engaged in education and outreach, policy advocacy, litigation, field conservation, and extensive, long-term water quality monitoring in pursuit of a boatable, swimmable, and fishable Anacostia. Once considered one of the ten most polluted rivers in the country, today the river is on the road to recovery due in large part to the efforts of DOEE and organizations like AWS, Anacostia Riverkeeper, and many others. It is these long efforts that have made the Splash event possible.

The Splash event has garnered great interest in DC, particularly among those who have followed the progress of the river for many years, such as government officials charged with improving water quality, organizations like AWS championing its recovery, local community members who recreate along the river, and those who see a healthy Anacostia

The George Washington House • 4302 Baltimore Avenue • Bladensburg, MD 20710-1031
o. 301-699-6204 • f. 301-699-3317 • info@anacostiaws.org • www.AnacostiaWS.org

River as key to community health and well-being. Unfortunately, interest has not been uniformly positive. Last year, when the Splash event was originally announced, many greeted the news with great enthusiasm, but others were skeptical. Indicative of some of the public's negative perceptions were numerous newspaper articles, person-on-the-street television interviews, local news commentaries, and social media posts expressing great reluctance to even consider swimming in the river. The cancellation of the Splash event in 2023 due to the potential for combined sewer overflow discharges into the river just prior to the event did little to assuage the public's doubts. AWS's concern here is two-fold: While some segments of the public may interpret the event as a general "green light" for swimming (which I think we can all agree is premature), others may be confused and unsettled by what they perceive as a strong signal about the river's condition that does not align with both long-held views and current understanding of the state of the river.

In addition to the public's historic worries about water quality, important voices are expressing concerns about the safety and accessibility of swimming in the Anacostia River even if improving water quality permits it. At this time, there is no administrative or physical infrastructure for swimming in the Anacostia, nor is there a publicly reviewed plan in place for how such resources will be developed to ensure safe and equitable access for all. In addition, swimming has been prohibited in the Anacostia River for so long that several generations have grown up along its banks with little experience in open water wading and swimming. Basic swimming and water safety skills education must be made available to the community in order to make local people safe and comfortable with a swimmable Anacostia River.

A successful Splash event is a good first step in highlighting progress on the way to swimming in the Anacostia River. However, in order to overcome decades of poor water quality and resulting disuse of swimming resources, and in order to move past such special events to more generally accepted and accessible swimming in the Anacostia River, the following steps must be taken:

- 1) The public must be assured that water quality in the river is meeting both *numerical and narrative* water quality standards for swimming.

When evaluating the "swimmability" of the Anacostia River, much attention is rightly paid to the level of *E.coli* bacteria in the river. It is improving numerical levels of *E. coli* that is largely fueling optimism that a swimmable river by 2025 is within reach, and indeed, it is the single most important factor. But it is not the only one. In fact, it may not be the factor that has most resonance with the public. Narrative factors such as water clarity and color, floating trash, deposited trash, oily water, and odor are just as important to convincing the public whether it is safe and healthy to swim.¹ In order for swimming in the Anacostia to be fully embraced, there will need to be visible and highlighted improvement in narrative as well as numerical factors.²

- 2) DC residents must be assured that effective administrative and physical infrastructure is in place to ensure safe and accessible swimming.

¹ For example, AWS staff have recently observed discoloration of water in the river as well as patches of oily water, both of unknown origin. While perhaps not technically obstacles to swimming, such instances help explain the reluctance of some to accept the notion that the river is swimmable.

² It is important to note that while there has been great progress, *E. coli* remains a challenge. Despite recent advances such as the expanded CSO tunnels of the Clean Rivers Project, subsequent analyses reveal that *E. coli* levels remain stubbornly high in parts of the river, which may be due to sewage escaping from boats and marinas or MS4 discharges, pet waste, or other sources. Work must continue to identify and remediate these sources.

Safe and accessible swimming will require ready access to information about swimming conditions on a daily basis, including information about water quality, tides, weather conditions, potential hazards, etc. In addition, DOEE and the DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) will need to identify, establish, maintain, and staff safe and accessible swimming areas that equitably serve communities on both sides of the river. The establishment of safe swimming areas should include considerations such as conditions of the riverbed (including hazards such as submerged trash and embedded pollutants)³; proximity to MS4 outfalls, marinas, and other potential sources of pollution; safe access points near communities of high potential use; proximity to environmentally sensitive areas such as mussel beds, active river and wetlands restoration sites, etc.; and other factors. It may also be worthwhile to consider the use of “river pool” structures that provide access while protecting swimmers from potential hazards in the open water and the riverbed.

- 3) Communities in DC must have access to basic swimming and open water safety education as well as training in swimming instruction, lifeguarding, etc.

As mentioned above, DC government, with support from community organization, must provide basic education in swimming and water safety and first aid, as well as training for future swimming instructors and lifeguards, in order to make local people safe and comfortable with a swimmable Anacostia River. This will provide not only summer recreation but summer job opportunities as well.

Obviously, each of the above requires much more detail, but AWS believes that these are the necessary basic steps to achieve a truly swimmable Anacostia River, and we are committed to working with DOEE, DPR, and all parties to take them successfully. We look forward to discussing each of these steps in greater depth.

In the meantime, we applaud DOEE for the remarkable progress in improving water quality that has made the Splash event possible and has advanced the idea of swimming in the Anacostia River from an abstract notion to a relevant and timely conversation.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

All the best,



Christopher E Williams
President and CEO

cc: Steve Saari, Acting Deputy Director, Natural Resources Administration, DOEE
Jonathan Champion, Associate Director, Water Quality Division, DOEE
Gretchen Mikeska, Anacostia Coordinator, DOEE
Marcus Coates, Deputy Director, Recreation Services, DPR
Suzy Kelly, President, Anacostia Riverkeeper

³ Including *E. coli*, which is found not only in the water column but also in riverbed sediment.