BetterBridge.org

THE PLAN THAT WORKS FOR SR520

POSITION PAPER FOR THE CITY OF SEATTLE

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As discussed at SR 520 Seattle Advisory Committee (SAC) meeting on June 13, 2006, the City of Seattle will conduct internal discussions, confer with WSDOT, and bring back to the table some ideas on how to modify WSDOT's SR 520 alternatives in an attempt to meet combined City and community priorities in Seattle. We are pleased that WSDOT will be included in this process, bringing their tremendous expertise and analytical ability to the table. In this position paper, BetterBridge.org offers its own ideas, analysis and opinions for the City of Seattle's consideration. This document is being distributed via email and will also be made available on our Web site.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pacific Interchange should be the basis for the City of Seattle's Preferred Alternative. There are many ways for the City to contribute before and after the Preferred Alternative is selected.

What will work:

WSDOT's Pacific Interchange plan with refinements, enhancements and mitigation:

- Demand context-sensitive, high quality design
- Plan sufficient mitigation for UW, Arboretum and neighborhoods (with early action)
- Narrow shoulders where appropriate
- Optimize pricing to reduce pavement required for queue storage
- Consider the tool of a regional MOU/MOA
- Design for Bus Rapid Transit on SR 520 connecting to light rail at UW
- Remove Montlake Freeway Flyer bus stops
- Potential early action: Build southbound HOV lane on Montlake Blvd.
- Potential early action: Accelerate initiation of tolls on SR 520
- Coordinate construction with Sound Transit
- Commit resources to plan for construction staging and construction mitigation

continued…

What won't work:

The other options in the Draft EIS:

- 4 lanes across the lake fails to accommodate transit and lacks political support
- 8 lanes across the lake has multiple fatal flaws
- The Base 6 alternative, with 9 lanes across Portage Bay, fails on mobility and livability
- Second Bascule Bridge (parallel Montlake drawbridge) fails on mobility and livability

Fewer lanes, transit-only lanes or deferring parts of the project:

- Light rail is not a silver bullet on SR 520
- 6 lanes across the lake narrowing to fewer than 6 over Portage Bay fails on mobility
- A reversible HOV lane on SR 520 would not shrink the Portage Bay Bridge
- Transit-only lanes fail for carpools and vanpools
- A transit-only connection to UW would not work
- Deferring the Portage Bay Bridge is not acceptable or advisable
- Deferring the Union Bay Bridge would not work
- Compromising bicycle lanes would be unacceptable and ill-advised

Pacific Interchange should be the basis for the City of Seattle's Preferred Alternative

While BetterBridge.org respects the ongoing dialogue and process of the SAC, we believe the City's interests would best be served by quickly rallying around the Pacific Interchange option, establishing the proper context for a preferred alternative decision to be made, and smartly refining the plan both before and after the preferred alternative is selected. To spur constructive dialogue on this, suggestions are made below.

Only Pacific Interchange, which relocates the Montlake interchange north of the ship canal, yields these benefits:

- A direct, fast and reliable **transit connection** from SR 520 BRT to Sound Transit's light rail station at UW.
- **Dramatically** reduced congestion and travel time on arterials in the Montlake/UW area, which is vital for local transit speed and reliability – with a **negligible** increase in SOV trips into the City.
- A continuous **greenbelt** connecting the Montlake Playfield on Portage Bay with the Arboretum – a waterfront to waterfront trail – with improved bicycle connections and pedestrian safety in the area.

Though Pacific Interchange has a slightly higher capital construction cost than the Base 6 alternative (8-10%), and construction costs are rising worldwide, there would be a far greater cost to our region of making the wrong decision on SR 520, or delaying the project. If we are committed to making transit work in this corridor, there is really only one choice and that is the Pacific Interchange option. Our experience is that the transit connectivity issue resonates with citizens from all over the region. We anticipate that this connectivity message will dovetail with the integrated roads/transit message of RTID/ST2, and that the absence of this connection would put the package and hence public safety and the security of our regional economy at a great and unnecessary risk.

BetterBridge.org does not believe that all of the refinement can or should take place prior to the selection of a Preferred Alternative. This process should go a lot more smoothly and efficiently once we embrace Pacific Interchange as a Preferred Alternative and we can focus limited City resources towards refining that plan.

What *will* work: Pacific Interchange, with refinements, enhancements and mitigation

BetterBridge.org believes that 6 lanes across the lake is a political inevitability and is required for transit speed and reliability[1]. Pacific Interchange is the only 6 lane configuration that meets the purpose and need of the project[2], assuming our definition of the "corridor" does not end abruptly at the entrance and exit ramps of SR 520.

It is the view of BetterBridge.org that any exercise that revisits basic assumptions and prior analysis at this point will eventually lead us back to the Pacific Interchange as it is currently defined in terms of lane counts and designations on various segments. However, BetterBridge.org recommends the following actionable steps:

Demand context-sensitive, high quality design

This highway passes through signature view corridors and the importance of aesthetics cannot be understated. Many of the opportunities are in the details and this will require skill and patience. Our enormous homegrown talent pool at the UW should be tapped. The historic values of the area must be respected, particularly its Olmsted heritage, which offers many good lessons for integrating the natural and built environments. The Montlake lid area and the terminus of Rainier Vista could be made more complete manifestations of the Olmsted vision than they are today. Land underneath the highway could be irrigated and landscaped. Water treatment could be celebrated as with the Renton Water Treatment Plant. This project has the potential for exemplary architecture, environmental design, and urban horticulture – if held to high standards.

Plan sufficient mitigation for UW, Arboretum and neighborhoods (with early action)

Develop and refine detailed mitigation plans for the University of Washington, Arboretum and Seattle neighborhoods, within reasonable budgetary limits. Evaluate "quiet pavement" as well as advanced materials and designs for noise walls. Reexamine DPD height and density limits where appropriate to accommodate the University's growth needs, while paying close attention to issues such as affordable housing, historic preservation, and neighborhood plans. Consider a toll surcharge at the Arboretum ramps to mitigate traffic and raise additional funds for the Project. Fund the Arboretum Master Plan. Construct parking garages of high design quality for the UW to mitigate expected parking impacts – before any campus disruption begins. Hire a world class architect like Santiago Calatrava to design such highly visible project elements as required pedestrian bridges.

Narrow shoulders where appropriate

Selectively narrow shoulders where safety and reliability can be maintained at acceptable levels. In general, with the 6 lane options, shoulders could be reduced or selectively removed, particularly downhill. Notably, I-90 shoulders are being narrowed and I-5 shoulders are very substandard on a much wider corridor. However, too much narrowing could have significant impacts to reliability and safety, and would face FHWA objections. This is a question of tradeoffs, and 4 or 6 feet in a corridor that is 130 feet wide may not really be noticeable.

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[1] Among the issues is I-5. The Project's analysis shows the Convention Center bottleneck on I-5 worsening, partially as a result of better transit service to downtown: a greater percentage of trips on I-5 are through trips. With limited ability to toll I-5 due to traffic diversion onto parallel arterials, even a politically unviable, aggressive pricing approach would not cure peak period SR 520 congestion in the general purpose lanes. Transit on SR 520 will be BRT (see transit discussion below) and BRT requires a traffic lane that offers speed and reliability, therefore additional lanes are required. The political winds have been blowing in favor of 6 lanes for years.

[2] "To improve mobility for people and goods across Lake Washington within the SR 520 corridor from Seattle to Redmond in a manner that is safe, reliable, and cost-effective while avoiding, minimizing and/or mitigating impacts on affected neighborhoods and the environment."

Optimize pricing to reduce pavement required for queue storage

Evaluate a more systemic regional tolling policy that includes the Alaskan Way Viaduct Project, the I-90 lake crossing and potential HOT lanes on I-405. Consider various schemes to separately and distinctly price individual SR 520 access ramps. Perhaps this could reduce the need for queue storage at entrance ramps, raise additional revenues and improve network efficiency.

Consider the tool of a regional MOU/MOA

A Memorandum of Understanding / Memorandum of Agreement between the City of Seattle, WSDOT and the various jurisdictions and agencies has the potential to address the City's remaining concerns about the project once we move toward a Record of Decision. This MOU/MOA would likely include provisions beyond SR 520 itself that reflect the City's regional priorities and commitments, and could address such concerns as traffic volumes and future convertibility of lanes.

Design for Bus Rapid Transit on SR 520

Some design improvements could be made to make SR 520 more of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor. In particular, the connection between SR 520 buses and light rail at UW in the Pacific Interchange option needs to be carefully optimized as a part of the rich multilayered design process that is needed at Montlake/Pacific.

Pacific Interchange enables, but does not require, rerouting buses to the UW. Bus routing is an operational decision for the transit agencies. Transfers are enabled, but not forced.

There are many benefits to enabling a bus-rail transit connection at the UW, beyond better access to the UW:

- The Eastside gets fast and reliable connections to downtown Seattle without suffering from congestion on I-5 or downtown streets. It will be a 6 minute trip from the UW light rail station to Westlake, and 12 minutes to the International District.
- The Eastside is linked to Seattle urban hubs such as Capitol Hill (3 minutes via light rail from UW), the University District and Northgate (7 minutes via light rail from UW) – which is significant for commuters in both directions.
- Bus service hours that would otherwise be spent sitting in congestion on I-5 and downtown streets can be redeployed more effectively.

Buses from the Eastside can be through-routed to the southwest UW campus area, the commercial part of the University District, and the Brooklyn light rail station, providing Eastside access to that part of campus, while simultaneously working alongside local bus routes to provide very frequent shuttle service from the UW light rail station to the dense SW campus area. Note that this will require bus staging space somewhere in the University District. This is currently projected to be in short supply, and may need to be funded.

Direct "one seat ride" bus service from the Eastside to downtown Seattle will degrade over time regardless of what happens with SR 520 for the following reasons:

- I-5 express lanes only run one way at a time. With projected residential growth in the Center City area, and projected employment growth on the Eastside, travel demand for the "reverse commute" will be significant and this reverse commute will suffer from I-5 congestion.
- There are roughly 30 traffic lights from Stewart St. to King St. Station, so commuters to the south end of downtown could spend twice as much time on downtown streets as it takes to get from Redmond to Montlake. Signal timing will not solve this problem.
- With projected growth in Denny Triangle and downtown, space for buses on downtown streets is expected to be at a great premium by the time a new SR 520 bridge opens.

Any bus transfers that are necessary on SR-520 will be facilitated in the future by improved schedule reliability, decreased headways, improved accessibility, amenities, and real-time rider information at bus stops.

Remove Montlake Freeway Flyer bus stops:

BetterBridge.org has heard reservations on the part of transit planners over removing the transit stop on the SR 520 mainline in Montlake. This is a very popular bus stop despite its inconvenience and inaccessibility.

Although this stop is convenient for residents of Montlake, a significant majority[3] of the users of this stop arrive or depart via buses or bicycles. With Pacific Interchange, and with more buses routed to serve the UW, the UW becomes the natural location for bus-bus transfer as well as bus-rail transfer. Local bus riders from the north would have a shorter trip to access buses to the Eastside if the transfer is made at UW. Local bus riders from the south would have a slightly longer trip but this trip would be made on an arterial with dramatically reduced congestion. Proximity to the Burke-Gilman trail makes this location a natural for bicycle access to transit.

The Montlake neighborhood is not a natural location for a major regional transit stop given its dominant single-family zoning. Bus stops were an afterthought in the original SR 520 plan. The UW is the natural location for this function, and a light rail stop is already planned in that location. It would be an unnecessary expense and waste of valuable land to construct two major high capacity transit stops a third of a mile away.

Potential early action: Build southbound HOV lane on Montlake Blvd.

With Pacific Interchange, Montlake Blvd. is widened from Pacific St. to the vicinity of 45th St. One idea that was suggested before Pacific Interchange was conceived is a southbound HOV lane on Montlake Blvd., to reduce person-hours of delay on the approach to the Montlake Bridge[4]. While this is not a solution for the whole problem, it could help achieve tangible benefits quickly, years before the completion of the SR 520 project. Efforts should be made to maintain the greenbelt alongside the Burke-Gilman trail and landscape Montlake Blvd. in a way that actually enhances the UW campus.

Potential early action: Accelerate initiation of tolls on SR 520

The SR 520 project will include tolls. The Project's traffic analysis shows that these tolls have significant traffic benefits in the corridor. With legislative action and support from WSDOT and the region, these could be instituted earlier rather than later, making better use of today's SR 520 bridge, while accelerating funding for project mitigation.

Coordinate construction with Sound Transit

Cut-and-cover construction impacts to the UW due to the Sound Transit Link light rail station are a major concern to the UW. Provided the Pacific Interchange option is chosen, the City should encourage Sound Transit and the SR 520 Project (of which Sound Transit is a co-lead agency) to coordinate their construction to avoid or minimize impacts to the UW. If it takes 15 months to construct the approach through the UW parking lots, those 15 months should be scheduled to minimize disruption for the UW. It might make sense for excavation to be performed under a joint contract, as the intersection of Montlake Blvd. and Pacific St., adjacent to the Sound Transit station location, may need to be lowered. Perhaps the Union Bay Bridge could be constructed earlier rather than later, quite some time before it would carry traffic, for use as a conveyor system for the "muck-out" from Sound Transit's project, thus limiting truck traffic on Montlake Blvd. While coordination might be somewhat of a headache for Sound Transit's North Link Project, which may want to go to bid sooner than the SR 520 Project, there are lots of opportunities for creative solutions here.

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[3] Source: SR 520 Freeway Transit Station Usage Report, July 2005, SR-520 Bridge Replacement & HOV Project

[4] See SDOT University Area Transportation Study, April 2002, Section 8-17, 2-f, "HOV lane extension on southbound Montlake Boulevard." The idea was later revived by the SR 520 Local Impact Committee.

Commit resources to planning for construction staging and construction mitigation

During years of SR 520 construction, an already untenable traffic situation and an already problematic pedestrian realm near the SR 520 interchanges will be further compromised. Mitigation of these impacts will be a substantial challenge that will require ongoing participation of the City, particularly SDOT, along with Metro and Sound Transit. Recent State legislation provides many options for construction mitigation[5], and these opportunities must not be missed with SR 520. This project will probably take place concurrently with the Alaskan Way Viaduct project, I-5 rehabilitation, I-90 reconfiguration, the Mercer corridor and the North Link light rail project, so the challenge is profound. While mitigation is vital, the cumulative construction impact will undoubtedly require understanding, patience and flexibility from Seattle citizens as well as the UW and other stakeholders.

What *won't* work, part I: The other options in the Draft EIS

We anticipate that the City will consider such things as the number of lanes on various segments of SR 520, their designation (GP, HOV, or transit-only), and the location of access ramps in an attempt to shrink the footprint of the facility while reducing cost and negative impacts.

What follows is an in-depth discussion of various options the City might consider, with our take on some of the pros and cons, based on everything we have learned by being intimately involved in this process over the last several years. We hope that the City will give careful consideration to these remarks.

4 lanes across the lake fails to accommodate transit and lacks political support

Political reality: Advocating for 4 lanes across the lake would instigate a battle royale with an alliance of Eastside jurisdictions, business and transit advocates. Dissatisfaction and resentment over City advocacy for this configuration could jeopardize the Viaduct project and possibly bring the entire negotiation process around RTID/ST2 to a halt. Stalemate would put both public safety and the regional economy at risk as neither SR 520 nor the Viaduct will survive a major catastrophic event. If the City held this ground, the legislature and Governor would be likely to act in the next session to strip the City of planning authority on both the Viaduct project and SR 520.

Regional transit: The 4-lane option as proposed by the Project does not provide transit speed and reliability that is necessary to provide a viable transit alternative in this corridor. Buses are stuck in congestion that is projected to increase dramatically across Lake Washington, failing to meet the purpose and need of the Project.

Local transit: The Montlake mess impacts speed and reliability for some of the most productive Metro bus routes including the 43 and 48. Unless the Montlake bottleneck is relieved, speed and reliability for local transit will continue to decline over time.

Traffic: The 4-lane option fails spectacularly for local traffic in the Montlake area, as well as for traffic on the mainline of SR 520. The traffic analysis performed by the Project for the DEIS has much to say about this.

Neighborhood and park impacts: The footprint of the 4 lane configuration is not only larger through Seattle than the current SR 520, but much larger, in fact, through the heart of Montlake than the footprint of Pacific Interchange. With 4 lanes, any Montlake lid (not included in DEIS) would fail to reconnect the neighborhood due to access ramps getting in the way. 4 lanes does not provide the continuous park and trail system provided by Pacific Interchange. The Montlake interchange is expanded, and overall, things are made worse for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit and local traffic. It should be noted that WSDOT's "4 lane" project has a 5 lane Portage Bay Bridge, which is almost as wide as the 6 lane Portage Bay Bridge associated with Pacific Interchange.

4 lanes may be the cheapest solution with the least Arboretum impact, but it has fatal flaws, particularly for transit.

[5] 2005-06 Washington State legislative session, ESHB 2871.SL, Sec. 4(8)(e) "Construction mitigation strategies…"

8 lanes across the lake has multiple fatal flaws

Political reality: The 8 lane configuration is a recipe for both political gridlock and traffic gridlock. There would be opposition from virtually everyone in Seattle whose support is required to pass RTID/ST2. BetterBridge.org knows that the City will never support this. However, if the City questions enough aspects of WSDOT's configurations, this could break open the floodgates and reinvigorate discussion of the 8 lane configuration.

Regional transit: As the most expensive option, 8 lanes would consume so much regional funding that we would have to scale back regional transit plans. It is essentially predicated on widening I-5 at least as far as Fort Lewis.

Local transit: The 8 lane option would cause massive congestion on our arterial streets, degrading local transit performance.

Traffic: The 8 lane option causes gridlock on I-5 and on the Eastside as well. I-5 would be at a standstill with backups on SR 520 all the way to Redmond every day. Expanding I-5 is neither affordable nor consistent with any of the City's principles.

Neighborhood and park impacts: Any 8 lane configuration would obviously have profound impacts. This option is so far from being viable it's not worth going into this in more depth.

In summary, 8 lanes across the lake would be unaffordable, unacceptable, and counterproductive to the purpose of the project.

The Base 6 alternative, with 9 lanes across Portage Bay, fails on mobility and livability

The Base 6 alternative, which is widely despised, and endorsed by no one, retains the Montlake interchange and the bus stop in Montlake. As developed by WSDOT, the Portage Bay Bridge must be 9 lanes due to the need for transit acceleration/deceleration and auxiliary (weaving) lanes.

Regional transit: The Base 6 lane alternative fails to make a fast and reliable transit connection to light rail. A 4-lane historic drawbridge forms the only connection between SR 520 and all of Northeast Seattle, including the University of Washington, the city's largest employer, and the most important light rail stop north of Westlake. Pedestrian and bicycle access to the Montlake bus stop would be very poor due to enormous congestion in the Montlake area. The Montlake bus stop would continue to separate UW and downtown-bound buses on an upper and lower level, causing confusion.

Local transit: The Base 6 alternative adds traffic to the already over-capacity Montlake Bridge. This will necessarily degrade traffic performance for some of the most productive routes in our bus system.

Neighborhood and park impacts: The physical footprint of the Base 6 alternative through Montlake and across Portage Bay is profound, prompting residents to nickname the interchange the "Montlake Monster." Mayor Nickels has stated that 9 lanes over Portage Bay will not happen on his watch, but these 9 lanes are integral to the function of the Base 6. The total acreage of parks impacts are about par with Pacific Interchange, but Base 6 covers more parkland at ground level. Unlike the area underneath high spans in the vicinity of Foster and Marsh Island with Pacific Interchange, this parkland is unusable.

The Project developed what is now called the Base 6 alternative in a sincere attempt to make a 6 lane configuration of SR 520 meet requirements while retaining today's interchange locations. The inevitable results led community leaders all over the City to host a protest meeting to express severe dissatisfaction. The meeting, held March 1, 2005 at MOHAI, was attended by some 350 Seattle citizens, with most of the City leadership in attendance.

The issues with Base 6 are the same today as they were back then. Thankfully, BetterBridge.org suggested another approach. The Project is to be highly commended for its willingness to evaluate that plan, its good judgment in screening out elements that were not feasible or advisable, and its skill and tenacity in reworking and refining viable concepts – a creative, rigorous, exhausting and inspiring process that led to the Pacific Interchange.

Second Bascule Bridge (parallel Montlake drawbridge) fails on mobility and livability

The Second Bascule Bridge option is even worse than Base 6 in almost every regard. It was introduced as a potential alternate approach to reduce the footprint and increase transit connectivity, but it does not deliver on these aims.

Regional transit: The Second Bascule Bridge fails to make a fast and reliable transit connection for SR 520 buses to the UW. It is particularly unreliable in off-peak times when the drawbridge goes up, but buses are generally stuck in tremendous congestion on Montlake Blvd. The SR 520 afternoon peak hours on which the restriction on bridge opening hours is based are not aligned with the UW schedule, which has peak travel demand earlier in the afternoon, so "off peak" transit reliability is a problem for access to the UW.

Local transit: Local and regional transit both share the extremely congested Montlake Blvd., and are equally slow and unreliable.

Traffic: In some ways, congestion is actually worse with this option than without a second drawbridge. By and large it is the same bad story as Base 6; there are other bottlenecks in the vicinity besides the bridge itself that are not and cannot be addressed by this plan.

Neighborhood and park impacts: The Second Bascule Bridge causes irreparable harm to the Montlake neighborhood, its Olmsted legacy (which includes Montlake Blvd.) and other historic resources, and has impacts to the UW campus without attendant benefits.

In summary, this option is not a serious contender.

What *won't* work, part II:
Fewer lanes, transit-only lanes or deferring parts of the project

Light rail is not a silver bullet for SR 520

The City might consider 4 general purpose lanes plus light rail or its equivalent. While BetterBridge.org is optimistic in the long term about high capacity transit and supports making bridge pontoons sufficient to carry HCT in the future, BetterBridge.org does not believe that traditional line-haul fixed-guideway HCT on SR 520 such as light rail should be viewed as a way of avoiding the need for HOV lanes on SR 520.

No room in Central Link tunnel: If light rail is constructed across SR 520, there is no room to merge SR 520 trains into the planned Central Link light rail tunnel, as that tunnel will be at capacity with future northern extensions of Link. Therefore, SR 520 rail passengers headed downtown would either be forced to transfer at UW, or we would need a second tunnel to downtown. It is hard to imagine the region funding a second tunnel to downtown Seattle from the north in the foreseeable future given all the other regional transportation priorities.

No funding scenario on the horizon for rail on SR 520: Beyond funding for long range planning studies, no funding for SR 520 rail is even on the candidate list for Sound Transit 2. Sound Transit 2 envisions HCT in the form of BRT, rail-convertible BRT or light rail crossing I-90 to Bellevue and possibly Redmond. It appears we would be looking to Sound Transit 3 or later to fund this, which is probably beyond the planning horizon for this project.

Transfers required on the Eastside as well as in Seattle: Transit on SR 520 must serve many locations in Kirkland and Bellevue as well as Redmond. Unless rail is built to all of those destinations at once – which does not seem likely – many trips would require a bus-rail transfer on the Eastside as well.

In the longer term, advanced point-to-point automated transit technologies such as PRT (personal rapid transit) hold promise for the distributed origins and destinations of trips in this corridor, but for the purposes of this SR 520 project, for the reasons above, transit on SR 520 will consist of buses in one form or another.

6 lanes across the lake narrowing to fewer than 6 over Portage Bay fails on mobility

The City may be tempted to consider dropping the westbound HOV lane at Montlake. Aside from the political controversy this would cause, there would surely be traffic issues with any bottleneck on westbound SR 520. Even with aggressive ramp metering today, the existing bottleneck on westbound SR 520 at Evergreen Point, where the HOV lane is dropped, is a major factor in the notorious congestion that extends to I-405 almost every day.

The City may be tempted to consider dropping the eastbound HOV lane across Portage Bay. This would seem to be incompatible with the desire to make a PM connection from the northbound I-5 express lanes to eastbound SR 520.

If the City feels due diligence requires asking the Project to model these scenarios, so be it, but BetterBridge.org believes that the Project has not proposed alternate configurations across Portage Bay for a good reason. BetterBridge.org notes that by far the most effective way to shrink the Portage Bay Bridge is to choose the Pacific Interchange option, which removes 3 lanes from that segment compared with the Base 6 alternative.

A reversible HOV lane on SR 520 would not shrink the Portage Bay Bridge

The City might consider a reversible center HOV or transit-only lane on the Portage Bay bridge to feed into/from the reversible express lanes on I-5. Since traffic volume is roughly balanced eastbound and westbound on SR 520, there is always some location where this configuration has a merge/bottleneck issue (see above).

Due to the separation required for public safety with a reversible lane, the physical footprint of this configuration is likely to match or even exceed a 6 lane Portage Bay bridge.

Transit-only lanes fail for carpools and vanpools

The City might consider restricting the use of any new lanes to transit-only. This would force carpools and vanpools to mix with general purpose traffic. Carpools and vanpools are a very popular and effective option in the SR 520 corridor, especially for the disparate origins and destinations on both sides of the lake that are difficult to serve with transit. Transit-only lanes would not offer speed and reliability for these modes, limiting their appeal and utility and reducing the people-carrying capacity of this project. Transit lanes have the same physical footprint as HOV lanes, with less mobility, and thus are not advisable for SR 520.

A transit-only connection to UW would not work

The City might consider constructing a two-lane Union Bay Bridge that is transit-only. This would shrink the interchange near Marsh Island, and reduce UW physical impacts, but would require the Montlake interchange to be retained, with all its impacts and lost opportunities for reconnecting the neighborhood and improving parks. Most of the disadvantages of the 4 lane alternative, outlined above, apply to this configuration. Local transit along Montlake Blvd. would continue to degrade over time, eroding transit performance.

Deferring the Portage Bay Bridge is not advisable or acceptable

The legislature has made it clear that RTID must fund SR 520 in one phase, from I-5 to I-405[6]. The Portage Bay Bridge is a seismic risk and must be replaced as soon as possible. It cannot be retrofitted as it is supported by hollow-columns on unstable soil. A retrofit would essentially be a new bridge. Construction costs are trending upward and deferring any portion of this project will pass even greater costs on to future taxpayers. Lastly the current Portage Bay Bridge is 4 lanes and any new floating bridge connecting to today's Portage Bay Bridge has the flaws outlined above related to fewer number of lanes on this segment.

Deferring the Union Bay Bridge would not work

The City might be tempted to consider a 6 lane floating bridge with 4 or 5 lanes up Portage Bay to I-5, a reconstructed and expanded Montlake interchange and a *deferred* connection to the UW.

Deferring the connection runs afoul of the legislative mandate[7] to fund the entire SR 520 project. Even if this mandate and a deferred Union Bay Bridge were somehow construed to be compatible, we would have two phases of construction in an environmentally critical area, which is likely to dramatically increase environmental impacts. Costs also increase over time due to inflation.

If the Montlake interchange is retained in its current location, we essentially have the Base 6 alternative, with a 9 lane Portage Bay Bridge, with all of the flaws and lost opportunities associated with that configuration (see above).

Funding and timing for any future Union Bay Bridge would be uncertain, and that uncertainty would be difficult to accommodate in UW campus planning.

Compromising bicycle lanes would be unacceptable and ill-advised:

Eliminating or reducing bicycle access would be counter to the City's bicycle goals and would also run afoul of Federal TEA21 legislation. The 14 foot bicycle trail proposed by WSDOT meets current standards and is appropriate given the heavy use expected on this trail.

The City should work with bicycle advocacy groups to determine which SR 520 segments besides the floating bridge ought to include a bicycle lane. WSDOT currently proposes a bicycle connection on the Union Bay Bridge with Pacific Interchange. It would be beneficial for bicyclists to provide connections to Madison Park, to the Montlake lid and playfield, and to Roanoke Park via the new Portage Bay Bridge. However, each of these needs a complete analysis as no pavement is without cost and environmental impacts. The Madison Park bicycle connection makes more sense at 43rd Ave. E than at 37th Ave. E. This connection should be carried forward into the FEIS for a complete analysis.

Directly south of the Montlake Bridge, Pacific Interchange removes almost half of the traffic from Montlake Blvd. The outer lanes, currently used for freeway on and off ramps, could be striped as bicycle lanes, connecting to the Montlake lid and the new trail system there.

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[6] 2005-06 Washington State legislative session, ESHB 2871.SL, Sec. 7: "The planning committee must develop and include… full project funding for seismic safety and corridor connectivity on state route number 520 between Interstate 5 and Interstate 405."

[7] Ibid.

Conclusion:

We hope that by sharing our thoughts on this matter, we might help to screen out less than viable options the City may be tempted to consider at this time. In our view it would be in the City's best interest to plan for support of Pacific Interchange, while pursuing the concepts outlined above under "What will work".

Transit / bicycle benefits: BetterBridge.org hopes that the City will recognize the tremendous benefits for transit and bicycles with Pacific Interchange, and notes that Transportation Choices Coalition is among the enthusiasts for Pacific Interchange.

Traffic benefits: Dramatically reducing congestion in the Montlake area – without yielding a significant increase in SOV traffic into the city – is both an environmental and an economic benefit. Based on thousands of conversations with Seattle residents, BetterBridge.org believes the reduction in traffic congestion associated with Pacific Interchange will be viewed very favorably by Seattle voters, whose support is obviously critical to getting anything done in this corridor.

Park Benefits: While an increased footprint in the Arboretum is both unfortunate and unavoidable, Pacific Interchange restores the continuous greenbelt between the Arboretum and Portage Bay and constructs a great new lid in the Montlake neighborhood (as well as the one at Roanoke Park.) This greenbelt, laced with trails, would be an amenity for all of Seattle to enjoy. Removing unused "ramps to nowhere", consolidating the remaining ramps, treating runoff and raising the elevation of the highway to allow sunlight, views and access underneath for plants, wildlife and visitors are all improvements in the Arboretum.

Funding: There is currently on the order of a $2 billion funding gap for SR 520. Given the importance of this corridor to the region, this seems like a reasonable amount to request of a possibly $7.4 billion RTID package in the 3 county region. With 14.5 cents in gas tax already established by the legislature in recent years, the state may now consider it the responsibility of the region to pick up the remaining tab for SR-520. If the City abdicates responsibility for funding SR 520 and asks the State to pay for the project in its entirety, the State may ask the City to cede responsibility for the major decisions on the corridor as well. BetterBridge.org encourages the City to support full funding for SR 520 in any RTID package.

Thank you for your careful attention to this important matter.

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