

BetterBridge.org

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March 1, 2005

*Via Email
And U.S. Mail*

Maureen Sullivan
Project Director
SR 520 Bridge Replacement & HOV Project
Urban Corridors Office
Washington State Department of Transportation
414 Olive Way, Suite 400
Seattle WA 98101

re: Alternative Proposal for Portion of SR 520 Spanning Portage Bay, Montlake and the Arboretum

Dear Maureen:

We want to express our sincere appreciation for your leadership and the effort and enthusiasm you and your team have displayed for our new approach to a six-lane SR 520. We are extremely impressed with your courage, flexibility and willingness to respond to community inspired ideas. We understand that a lot of work will be required between now and the release of the Draft EIS. We intend to help every we can to arrive at a shared and validated plan for SR 520 that meets regional and local needs, succeeds in gaining broad consensus, and achieves its goals.

The recent all-day workshop on this vision, hosted by the Project and with participation from Sound Transit, King County Metro, the City of Seattle, the University of Washington and others, was an excellent foundation for the “partnership” referenced in WSDOT’s Statement Regarding the Signature Bridge Proposal from the Montlake Neighborhood. We are very pleased that you have invited us to participate in future workshops and to work with members of your team. We also appreciate your commitment to keep us up to date on results you obtain regarding studies of this new approach.

We have prepared a mission statement (attached) that clarifies our goals and objectives. As you know we have been very successful in raising interest, awareness and support for our vision. We have given many presentations to community groups, media and political leaders in the city and state and continue to field inquiries from the media and others. We have a very rare opportunity to work together with you in support of a vital link in the regional transportation system. We are excited by the potential of this collaboration.

As you know there are many very active community volunteers and leaders on both sides of the lake who oppose all efforts to expand SR 520 beyond its current four-lane configuration. Many are even unhappy with the current four lane alternative given the width and interchange configurations. We have presented a vision for a six-lane alternative that we expect will maintain the benefits of the current proposals while dramatically improving regional transit and addressing many of the aesthetic, traffic and environmental impacts at the same time. Many who have spent years in bitter disagreement with each other agree that our vision is compelling and deserves thorough exploration. It is very important as the vision evolves to an actual plan to nurture this fragile but critical alliance by respecting the elements of the vision that have garnered such widespread enthusiasm from so many disparate groups.

Given the initial discussions that have taken place so far, we predict our greatest concerns going forward are likely to be:

1. the width of and height of the bridge structures; the bridges should be as narrow as possible and as high as possible while meeting needs of the Project.
2. the quantity and the design of the structures necessary to support the bridges; they should be few, far between, and cause no unnecessary displacement and ground impact.
3. the potential interest, not presently mandated by the SR 520 Executive Committee, to accommodate future expandability on any of these structures. No unjustified expandability should be accommodated.
4. the overall aesthetic impression; these should be viewed as landmark structures that beg to be included in literature promoting the beauty and reflecting the pride of Washington State.

One of the key determining factors in terms of the physical design of any bridge structure is whether it needs to be made expandable in the future. We strongly support transit and believe it is vital to link transit service on SR 520 to the Link light rail system in Seattle. We understand that the demand for transit in this corridor may be so great in the long term that there is a compelling case for more than one high capacity transit link to be constructed across Lake Washington, whose form is yet to be determined, beyond the likely extension of Link light rail from Seattle to Bellevue in the I-90 corridor. But that said, before we spend precious dollars today to accommodate a future that is far from certain, it is important for us as a region to consider the likelihood, the timing, the form and the route of potential HCT on SR 520.

The SR 520 Executive Committee has expressed a desire to accommodate potential expandability for HCT at an uncertain date in the future on a replacement floating bridge, by using larger pontoons. There has been no commitment to accommodate HCT on the other structures in the corridor and until or unless that decision is revisited, we do not see a reason to limit ourselves to expandable structures for either the Portage Bay Bridge or the bridge to the UW area in conjunction

with our vision. Such expandability may impose severe design constraints on the type of bridges we envision and could raise the costs more than is justified before making a commitment to a specific plan. If and when a form for HCT is chosen, be it light rail, monorail, personal rapid transit or another future high capacity transit mode, a supplemental structure could theoretically be constructed, though this may compromise the aesthetic quality of this structure if it is above grade in this area.

If and when the HCT accommodation issue is revisited in conjunction with Sound Transit's Final SEIS for the Long Range Plan, expected this summer, or in conjunction with any other effort, there may be calls for accommodation for HCT beyond the floating bridge pontoons in the SR 520 corridor. That said, the probability that the region will fund any HCT project that does not meet the North Link line at UW seems vanishingly small.

We do not believe that there is either a mandate or a need to provide expandability for future HCT through Montlake and across Portage Bay under any HCT configurations likely to be studied in the future. Roanoke Park is not and will not be an urban hub, and the myriad of issues in running a transit line along I-5 have already been explored in depth in conjunction with Sound Transit North Link. We are very uncomfortable with the compromises that would inevitably have to be made to achieve expandability across Portage Bay. The sheer scale of a 180' wide bridge overhead would be dramatically inconsistent with the vision we have encouraged our neighbors to support. Additionally, even if there should be a desire to accommodate future HCT expandability on the gateway bridge to UW, the desire to accommodate this as-yet undefined possibility needs to be measured against the costs, impacts, and design constraints that this would impose on what we envision as a elegant, graceful and delicate structure.

Returning to the Portage Bay Bridge: Though current alternatives do not include a pedestrian/bicycle connection across Portage Bay, a level bridge enables such a connection and the idea was suggested at the workshop. Although a level bicycle connection across Portage Bay would be a great amenity, and the needs of bicycles and pedestrians have been very much in mind as we conceived our vision, the increased cost and impact associated with this additional 14 feet of width are unlikely to be worth it in the final analysis. The most important ped/bike links are across Lake Washington, to the Burke-Gilman trail, to the planned Arboretum bicycle path, and underneath the corridor in the greenbelt that is created by raising 520 through Montlake. A potential connection in the vicinity of 43rd Ave. E in Madison Park should continue to be explored in conjunction with this vision as the City of Seattle has requested in conjunction with the prior alternatives. Whether or not this connection is constructed, hopefully it would not be precluded.

Even with full 10 foot shoulders, a six lane Montlake / Portage Bay structure need be no greater than 112 feet wide (six 12 foot travel lanes plus 40 feet of shoulders) for the majority of its length. As we know, costs of suspension or cable-stay structures tend to increase nonlinearly with regard to deck width so the cost differential between a bridge that is 112 feet wide and a bridge that is 180 feet wide might be profound. We also need to continue to seek opportunities to narrow it below this level while maintaining safety, in order to reduce both costs and impacts. It is worth noting that we are planning on reducing shoulders on I-90 to as little as two feet, so 10 foot shoulders on both sides of the roadway are clearly not an incontrovertible requirement.

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We very much look forward to working with you on this project. Hopefully this mission statement clarifies our thoughts and provides you with a framework for moving forward. We would be delighted to meet with you to clarify the points we have made in this letter and mission statement. We are quite certain there will be many questions going forward and we look forward to this continued dialogue.

Again, we congratulate you for your openness to our vision and for the terrific work your department has done in such a short period of time.

Sincerely,

Rob Wilkinson

Jonathan Dubman

Ken Schubert, III

Peter Stoner

Enclosure

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