



## **Process and Design Recommendations for State Route 520**

September 2012

The Seattle Design Commission (SDC) enthusiastically supports the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) Vision for the State Route (SR) 520 Corridor in Seattle, which was developed through an inclusive and transparent community design process. The Vision that has emerged is rooted in Seattle's natural and cultural history, and it establishes a tangible set of goals and values that should guide future decision-making.

Not since the 1903 Parks, Boulevards and Playgrounds Plan by the Olmsted Brothers have we had such a significant opportunity to improve this part of the Seattle. But the physical and bureaucratic landscape today is far more complex than it was in 1903. Therefore, we must work diligently and tenaciously across agency and disciplinary boundaries. If we're successful, instead of a collection of adjacent but disparate parts, the new SR 520 Corridor will work together to make a whole system.

This vision is attainable if the City of Seattle becomes a strong partner with WSDOT. The impact and potential benefits of the new SR 520 are comparable to projects like the Central Waterfront and Yesler Terrace, but it is not receiving the same level of city consideration. We urge you to dedicate a City Champion, an individual or team who will work closely with WSDOT and multiple city departments to ensure that the SR 520 Vision is realized and that our citizens enjoy the greatest possible benefit from this once in a lifetime opportunity. This person or team needs to be empowered to work across departmental boundaries, with a schedule that allows them to be an effective partner to WSDOT (full-time if necessary).

The Seattle Design Commission has played an active and constructive role in the SR 520 process for the last five years. We believe that the new SR 520 should be a leading example of 21st-century infrastructure. This means:

- it is multifunctional,
- it is built sustainably,
- it is a good neighbor that connects sensitively to its surroundings,
- it fills gaps in the existing urban fabric and systems,
- it reveals unexpected opportunities to make great new public places.

In short, the project should create a whole that's much larger than the sum of its parts - thereby making a better city and fostering community. This is not the language of "mitigation." Instead, it's an attitude and approach of integration, which requires everyone to pay attention and work together with a high-level of creativity. In a previous (2010) SDC letter to the City Council we pointed out that, given its complexity, the SR 520 corridor demands such an approach. We believe WSDOT has set the stage for this to happen.

We applaud WSDOT for assembling a creative team of staff leaders and visionary consultants. Together they have followed an open-ended approach to developing the Vision and current set of design preferences. After presenting the key aspects of the project, along with choices and trade-offs, to thousands of community stakeholders, including the SDC, the team listened patiently and adjusted their proposals in response. We thank them for their effective visual presentations which have made it easy for commissioners and lay persons alike to understand the project's complexities and provide meaningful feedback. The results clearly demonstrate that the new SR 520 is not just a highway replacement, but a framework of interrelated projects that can work together to improve the region, the city and adjacent neighborhoods in many different ways.

Below we will summarize the commission's involvement to-date on SR 520, clarify our comments about the Vision, and provide specific recommendations on the Design Preferences that emerged from it. We will explain how the city should play a much more active role going forward, and how we envision our future involvement.

### **Design Commission Involvement To-Date**

The Seattle Design Commission's in-depth work in the SR 520 corridor began in the spring of 2010 when commissioners played a key role in the Montlake Triangle Workgroup, which was administered by WSDOT and authorized by the State Senate. Although this particular project was located north of the highway and ship canal, the decisions made here were inextricably linked to the SR 520/Montlake Blvd. interchange. During the summer of 2010, the SDC participated in a similar multi-agency Transit Connections Workgroup which addressed multi-modal transportation issues along Montlake Blvd., between Montlake Triangle and 24th Ave. E.

The Design Commission has participated in the selection process for the design-build team for the new floating bridge and has provided detailed reviews of the floating bridge design.

In 2011 and 2012, the SDC has played an active role in the Seattle Community Design Process through membership in the SR 520 West Side Community Design Collaborative, by hosting WSDOT briefings to the full Commission, implementing a Design Commission subcommittee that reviewed early design ideas for project sub-areas, and by helping WSDOT develop the overall vision.

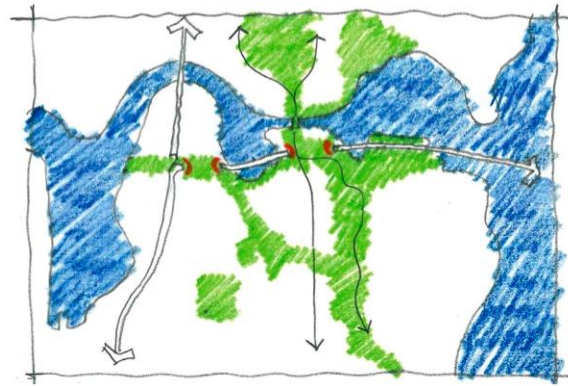
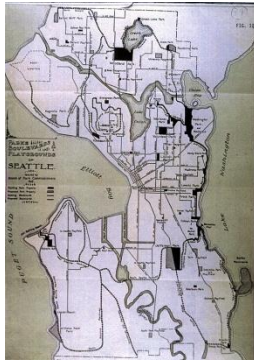
### **Endorsement of Vision**

The Vision for the SR 520 Corridor is a meaningful guiding document for three fundamental reasons.

1. It embraces both WSDOT's core mission and the aspirations of Seattle residents.
2. It revives the legacy of the 1903 Parks, Boulevards and Playgrounds Plan which shaped the city's development on both sides of the Lake Washington Ship Canal.
3. It establishes our collective values today and the future benefits we expect to receive from this infrastructure investment.

The vision should be a touchstone for all WSDOT sub-projects in the SR 520 Corridor in Seattle, including bridge segments, lids, and transitions into surrounding neighborhoods and aquatic environments.

Ultimate success depends on some sub-projects reaching beyond WSDOT's technical boundaries. Therefore, the Vision also needs to be a touchstone for the City of Seattle and other public agencies working in the corridor. And to be truly effective, the Vision must be part of the decision-making process from start to finish, including procurement/contract processes (delivery method), design, phasing, construction, etc.



### **Endorsement of Current Design Preferences**

When WSDOT started the SR 520 Seattle Community Design Process, the project's EIS Preferred Alternative served as a baseline from which additional options could be explored. Due to the size and complexity of the overall project, the team logically divided the corridor into three sub-areas: Montlake Area, Portage Bay Bridge and Roanoke Area. As the community and SDC provided input, a refined vision became clearer. At the same time WSDOT refined their technical knowledge in each sub-area. A range of early options for each area was gradually whittled down to the current set of design preferences set forth in the recently released WSDOT document. We support the process that led to these preferences and their current state of resolution (or lack thereof). The design preferences are not final solutions. Instead they are judgments, based on current knowledge and input, about how to best approach the next design steps in each sub-area. In some areas the preferences provide a relatively clear trajectory, in other areas they provide a narrower set of options requiring further investigation. In all cases, the preferences provide an appropriate level of flexibility for design refinements if new technical challenges arise.

We support the idea of continuing the design process with a tiered and sequential approach: proceeding to preliminary design on elements of the project that are a priority for funding, refining conceptual corridor-wide design, and targeted neighborhood centric design. The City can assist in supporting this design process through edge type projects which would soften the edge and stretch the project further into the neighborhoods.

### **Comments on Corridor, Sub-Areas and Design Preferences**

#### Corridor: Sequential Gateway Experience

Unlike I-90, the SR 520 corridor does not provide an abrupt gateway into Seattle. Instead, as you move through the corridor, a series of natural and built elements unfold around you and Seattle's hillside neighborhoods are revealed. We encourage the WSDOT team to enhance this arrival sequence by

exploring different designs for the places where land meets water. We're also eager to see how the details of the Montlake and Roanoke lid portals and the Portage Bay Bridge can help orchestrate this experience.

#### Sub Area: Montlake

##### Design Preferences: Montlake Lid

The options for the Montlake Lid have caused spirited debate among commissioners. Although not unanimous, most commissioners prefer Lid Option B, which has a lower wall height at the east portal and a tunnel/trough cutting through the lid for HOV ramps. That said, the SDC strongly recommends that WSDOT study a wider range of options for the Montlake Lid before a design direction is determined.

Further explanation:

1. Among the WSDOT team, community stakeholders and commissioners, the open surface of the lid has never been embraced as a compelling destination or place for active uses. Understandably, WSDOT will not assume the responsibility for programming this space. As it is currently conceived, we worry that the lid's surface will not be frequently used, except for occasional visitors to the east edge for views. And, if in the end we're only making a view point, there are many other ways to achieve that outcome.
2. It may be possible, and beneficial, to shorten the length of the tunnel by moving the east portal westward, away from the water's edge. WSDOT has described some of the trade-offs of such a move, but it would be far easier to evaluate the merits of this idea if additional drawings, models and pros/cons were presented.
3. Taking that idea further, a few commissioners have even suggested that WSDOT consider removing the east half of the Montlake Lid altogether. Can we achieve goals of improved north/south connectivity, sound reduction, sensitive transitions to neighborhoods by through much different designs? To answer that question, we recommend the WSDOT study an even wider set of options, essentially bracketing the spectrum full lid to minimal lid.

These comments represent just a few of our substantive questions and concerns about the Montlake Lid, which can only be resolved after additional study and deliberation. Borrowing a term from an engaged Montlake Neighborhood resident, we are advocates for a "smart lid," not necessarily a large lid. If the lid can be scaled back or optimized, while maintaining its benefits for both users and neighbors, then perhaps we can create a win/win for everyone and redirect limited funds for improvements in other parts of the corridor.

##### Design Preferences: Trail along East Montlake Shoreline (under SR 520 West Approach)

We strongly support the proposed waterside trail that will connect the Arboretum area to East Montlake Park, Shelby-Hamlin and the University beyond. However, we are concerned about the safety and spatial quality of the trail portion that passes under the SR 520 West Approach. WSDOT has explained in detail how the bridge height at this location cannot be changed. The SDC asks that the team make this area as safe and welcoming as possible for the cyclists and pedestrians passing by, whether this is through maintaining sightlines, lighting and/or other CEPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) measures.

##### Design Preferences: Montlake Boulevard

It's our understanding that SDOT prefers to not change the curb to curb dimensions of Montlake Boulevard. We recommend that SDOT and the City keep an open mind on this issue. As the planning

and design of the Montlake sub-area evolves, WSDOT and/or SDOT may ultimately find a better solution, one that improves connectivity and through-put for all modes of travel. If we can identify appropriate changes, then we should take advantage of this rare window of opportunity to implement them.

#### Sub-Area: Portage Bay Bridge

The Portage Bay Bridge is one of the most prominent parts of the SR 520 corridor in Seattle. We support WSDOT's decision to continue studying the box girder and cable stay options, because each has a distinctly different set of pros and cons. We're aware that many community members are concerned about protecting views, minimizing bridge width and reducing traffic noise. But as design professionals, we also know that these concerns can be addressed in many different ways. Often it's the details that make all the difference. We urge the council to weigh the bridge options with a critical and detail-oriented eye. We gladly offer our assistance to help you see things from our perspective, if it will help.

#### Shared-Use Path Essential

We believe that a shared-use path must be added to any type of Portage Bay Bridge. A path along the south side of the bridge would create a useable, low-slope connection from the Montlake area to the Roanoke Lid, I-5 and beyond. This is one of the most important decisions we can make. It not only aligns with the City's bicycle master plan, it also realizes the Vision's goal of regional, city-wide and neighborhood connectivity for all users.

A shared-use path will increase the width of the bridge, which some neighbors oppose. We believe the regional importance of the path outweighs the opposition, but this is an example where details really matter. A strict adherence to narrowness will not necessarily ensure better design. Concerns about bulk and width can be addressed by making sure the final design has a narrow profile, especially when viewed from the side. Concerns about shadows below the bridge might be offset by actually making a larger gap between east and west bound lanes, letting more light through.

We have faith that WSDOT and its bridge designer, along with input from SDC, have the necessary skills to create an elegant and attractive design that meets our collective goals and aspirations.

#### Sub-Area: Roanoke

We are very excited about the new park that will be created on the Roanoke Lid. It's not yet clear whether this park should be designed for active or passive uses, or a mix of both, but that decision can wait. It's important, however, to commit to Roanoke sub-area elements that will provide critical linkages from the SR 520 Corridor to the rest of the city. The new bicycling and pedestrian paths are among these critical elements. On the east side of the new park, they should connect as seamlessly as possible to the shared use path on the Portage Bay Bridge. On the west side of the park, we support the design preference to extend a path under 10th Ave. E and connect it to the north end of Broadway.

We're concerned about a potential conflict on the east side of the park, specifically along Delmar Ave. at the new Bagley Viewpoint. While the current condition has off-street parking, the new design assumes that parallel parking on Delmar Ave. will adequately serve the viewpoint. This may work, but the final design for Delmar Ave. should also have a safe crossing for pedestrians and bicycles moving between the Portage Bay Bridge and the park. On-street parking should not block the crossing or its associated sightlines. If this is not possible, then we encourage the team to consider a different parking solution for the new Bagley Viewpoint.

The intersection of 10th Ave. E and E Roanoke St. deserves a special treatment, because it's the "knot" that ties the new park and the existing Roanoke Park together.

The southern edge of the new park seems to be treated ambiguously. It's unclear where the public WSDOT and the Federal Avenue right-of-way ends and privately owned lots begin. For example, it could be treated exclusively as a buffer that separates existing houses from the park. On the other hand, it could create opportunities for existing houses or possibly new development to overlook the park, improving its CEPTED performance. Or, maybe it becomes something else. In any case, since this is the only side of the park not bounded by streets, it should be designed to establish clear physical and social relationships between the public and private realms.

## **Achieving the Vision - Recommendations on the City of Seattle's Role and Overall Project Approach**

### "Build the Whole" through WSDOT / City of Seattle Coordination

If WSDOT is an expert in regional transportation, then the City of Seattle is a seasoned community builder with experts in parks, local streets, utilities, public buildings and land-use. It's clear to us that both sides need each other, and that the City needs to ramp up its participation significantly. The City has a responsibility to join this effort, given the scale at which the project will impact the urban fabric. As we mentioned in our introduction, the City should assign a champion for this project as soon as possible. This person or team needs to be empowered to work across departmental boundaries, with a schedule that allows them to be an effective partner to WSDOT (full-time if necessary). Ideally the champion will represent the City in technical and design groups formed by WSDOT, speaking with a single or unified voice. Beyond that, the champion will take the initiative to identify and fill the gaps that lead to "building the whole." Put another way, it will make sense for the City to take the lead on smaller, but crucial, parts of the corridor, especially those outside WSDOT's boundaries.

The Roanoke sub-area has a number of examples where the city may lead or fill the gap:

- The trail linkage to the north end of Broadway,
- The design of the 10th Ave. and Roanoke St. intersection,
- Sidewalk improvements along Roanoke St., west of 10th Ave E, to I-5, Boylston Ave. and beyond.

A good partnership between WSDOT, the City of Seattle and other agencies can have early benefits as well. The 2010 Montlake Triangle Workgroup, which was led by WSDOT and included the City of Seattle, Sound Transit, King County Metro and the University of Washington, shows us that successful inter-agency partnerships can also be advantageous when seeking federal funding, because they promote wise use of public dollars.

### Elevate Urban Design in Future Contracts for Design/Delivery

The SR 520 process to-date has included a good mix of structural and environmental feasibility studies, community involvement, and design thinking at multiple scales. Having an urban design team on-board has given WSDOT a nimble "zoom lens" for evaluating competing issues. It has allowed them to quickly understand trade-offs and resolve individual problems without losing the big-picture view, and vice-versa.

Based on our recent experience with similar infrastructure projects, the SDC encourages WSDOT to have a qualified designer assist them with the next round of scoping and writing of RFQs/RFPs. The selection criteria in future RFQs/RFPs should include compliance with the Vision for SR 520 and all critical urban

design aspects. To avoid confusion, any criteria that cannot be clearly communicated through text alone should be illustrated. Consider including specifications in future RFQs/RFPs with required levels of quality where appropriate. Clearly explain how “alternate means of compliance” will be handled and weighted in the selection process. Any proposed alternate ways of complying with urban design criteria should be carefully scrutinized prior to awarding contracts. The qualified designer mentioned above should participate in that review.

We also strongly recommend that a qualified urban designer is also on the team after procurement is complete. This "comprehensive design leader" would not be responsible for detailed engineering, landscape design, or architecture. Instead they would help WSDOT, the City and the contractor/consultant teams ensure that individual projects and sub-areas are coordinated and that the interfaces between smaller projects and project edges are well integrated so that everything is working together to "build the whole." This position should be empowered to direct teams on both sides of project boundaries to create a seamless edge.

#### Ongoing Design Commission Involvement

The Design Commission believes that we have made a positive impact on the SR 520 process over the past five years. We sincerely hope that we'll have many opportunities to bring our multidisciplinary and city-wide perspective to the project for years to come.

We believe that one of the areas we can have significant positive impact on for this project is in design and construction consultant selection. As with the Floating Bridge and Landings project, we ask that WSDOT invite us to help select design and construction teams for future phases of work. During interviews we can help judge how well the different teams will work with the Commission and other stakeholders. And since we know the overall project so well, we can also help judge how well the applicants will be able to meet the SR 520 Vision and urban design intent.

We would like to review the West Approach Bridge, Portage Bay Bridge, and other elements that become prioritized for funding as WSDOT moves forward with their preliminary and final designs.

If the City of Seattle takes the lead on any elements in the corridor (and we certainly hope it does), then naturally we would like to play a similarly engaged role, from selection committee to design reviews.

Sometimes it's more effective to tackle detailed, tough or time-sensitive issues in a sub-committee or workgroup, rather than with the whole commission. We will evaluate the need for such groups as the project progresses, then ask commissioners to participate when needed and as time allows.