

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/286031_viaduct22.html

Waterfront street a viable alternative

Friday, September 22, 2006

SCOTT BERNSTEIN AND JOHN NORQUIST

GUEST COLUMNISTS

Although the state and city transportation departments have expressed official support for either a replacement viaduct or a tunnel, both alternatives are fraught with serious drawbacks. As news broke that already soaring cost estimates for the viaduct and tunnel alternatives had grown again, the advantages of the surface alternative became more apparent. The transit and streets alternative is an option Seattle leaders cannot afford to ignore.

Our organizations, the Center for Neighborhood Technology and the Congress for the New Urbanism, recently commissioned respected transportation analysts at Smart Mobility Inc. to review the Washington State Department of Transportation's analysis of the "no-replacement" option. Their review concluded that the state made incorrect assumptions, including: Most Alaskan Way Viaduct trips are long distance through the city; the viaduct is critical for freight movements; the downtown street grid lacks capacity to move additional traffic.

The WSDOT model inflated traffic projections, didn't account for transit capacity improvements, lacked detail on the downtown grid and assumed a street design inappropriate for this location. Nevertheless, WSDOT gathered some valuable data and Smart Mobility concluded that a waterfront street was a viable alternative. Despite its crude design, the model showed that 42 percent of current viaduct trips could be absorbed on parallel routes; 30 percent could be carried by a new surface street; and 28 percent would be reduced from adaptive behavior. Similar redistribution and adaptation has occurred in more than 70 cases worldwide where highway capacity was reduced or highways were removed.

Correcting the model to reflect urban street design standards and accurate traffic and transit conditions likely will show that this alternative will meet transportation needs in this corridor.

A sound surface street and transit proposal will recognize the ability of the downtown grid to absorb some of the diverted traffic. The model also should incorporate the new transit capacity from Sound Transit's Central Link along with improved freight movement with the improved South Spokane Street Viaduct. An urban street integrated with the street network and transit system is inherently more resilient and will better respond to future transportation changes -- at a considerably lower public expense.

The three replacement options would have very different economic and environmental consequences. The elevated replacement would add no value to the downtown area. Both the tunnel and the transit and streets options will enhance the downtown and stimulate redevelopment, but the tunnel's beneficial impact is constrained because much of state Route 99 would remain as a grade-separated barrier between downtown and the water.

The transit and streets alternative would stimulate transit-oriented development in Seattle. An increasing number of households would be able to get around while owning one less car. This could reduce their transportation costs by \$300 to \$400 per month and increase their disposable income by 10 percent. Using those incentives, the Seattle region could meet environmental goals as well. To reach local greenhouse gas reduction targets, Seattle's Green Ribbon Commission found that it must significantly reduce the number of automobile trips. Increasing traffic on a higher capacity elevated or underground highway would take the city

in the opposite direction.

We urge city leaders to consider a streets and transit alternative as they decide the fate of Seattle's waterfront. Both the tunnel and the elevated freeway options are expensive and would bring damaging side effects for years to come. A surface street alternative has the potential to add more value at significantly less cost and risk. An urban street would allow Seattle to correct the mistakes made a half-century ago and reconnect the downtown with its waterfront.

Scott Bernstein is president of the Center for Neighborhood Technology. John Norquist is president of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

© 1998-2006 Seattle Post-Intelligencer