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**Cost to replace viaduct could rise drastically****New figures could force fresh look at surface plan**

*Wednesday, September 20, 2006*

**By LARRY LANGE**  
P-I REPORTER

The cost of replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct might be "significantly" higher than anticipated, raising questions about which viaduct-replacement alternatives are financially possible and whether officials should reconsider previously dismissed plans to eliminate the viaduct.

Revised cost estimates for replacing the viaduct and the 520 Bridge, or Evergreen Point Bridge, to the Eastside, which are scheduled to be released today, could be 45 percent higher than current ones, Seattle City Council members contacted Tuesday said.

"I think we will learn very soon that the choices (for the viaduct) are far too limiting" and may be out of financial range, said Councilman Peter Steinbrueck.

Officials are deciding between building a new viaduct, which was expected to cost between \$2 billion and \$2.4 billion, and building a six-lane tunnel, favored by most council members and Mayor Greg Nickels, estimated at between \$3 billion and \$3.6 billion.

A state-appointed panel of experts, however, warned in August that costs could change dramatically because of construction-cost inflation. The panel questioned whether the current cost estimates underestimated inflation, adding that materials costs could end up being four times as high.

Councilman Richard Conlin and Steinbrueck said much higher estimates likely will prompt council members to rethink eliminating another option that calls for removal of the viaduct, without replacing it, then disbursing traffic onto surface streets and into expanded bus service.

The state has rejected that idea so far and most council members doubted that the option would adequately handle the 100,000-plus vehicles using the viaduct each day.

But, Conlin said, the numbers could be "a new impetus for people to say, 'Let's take another look and see if we can find a way to make it work.' "

Councilman Richard McIver said he prefers a version of that plan, which calls for six lanes to be built at ground level where the viaduct and surface Alaskan Way now stand, with access points to downtown.

The new estimates being released today were developed at the request of Gov. Chris Gregoire, who is expected to make the final decision about which viaduct-replacement will be built.

The council also could separately endorse an option by passing an ordinance, which Gregoire could then consider.

McIver said Tuesday he heard about the possible 45 percent increase, but said he wanted the figures examined before he accepts them.

"I know they're very high," he said of the new estimates, but he said he's skeptical because the city Department of Transportation assured council members the earlier estimates "were right on."

If the new numbers are dramatically higher, a citywide tunnel-vs.-replacement advisory vote is less certain; McIver said it would be unfair of the council to ask voters to pick an alternative based on questionable numbers.

Even if the costs are up, Councilman David Della said Tuesday, he still wants to put the issue on the ballot -- and include the cost estimates.

But Steinbrueck, vice chairman of the council's Transportation Committee, who has never supported a public vote on the issue, disagrees.

"There are too many issues, too many questions and too many unknowns" about the two viaduct options, he said.

Efforts to confirm the new figures with the DOT or how much they'll increase were unsuccessful Tuesday.

Members will discuss several measures related to the viaduct, along with the new figures, at a special meeting scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Friday in its chambers at City Hall. Members also are expected to vote on a proposed property tax transportation levy for the November ballot, though there'll be an effort to reduce its size and time limit.

An ordinance supporting a tunnel replacement, a resolution calling for an agreement on whether the city or state pay cost overruns for the viaduct project, and another ordinance to prevent building a new elevated highway are on the agenda for consideration.

An up-or-down vote on the tunnel alone also will be discussed, but isn't likely to be approved for the ballot.

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