U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

Washington State
Department of Transportation

City of Seattle

June 2005 Public Meetings - What We Heard
Executive Summary

The Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project hosted three public meetings on June 21, June 22, and June 23, 2005. The purpose of the open houses was to begin a conversation with the public about how the tunnel may be built and how to keep people and goods moving during construction. During the meetings, the public had an opportunity to view project information and to speak with the project team about construction options and other details of the proposed plan. There was a brief formal presentation at each meeting given by team members who outlined details and possible construction phases. They also walked through an animated simulation of the proposed tunnel layout.

The three meetings were held throughout the project corridor, in neighborhoods that will be directly affected by the upcoming construction and improvements. The northern corridor meeting was held at the National Guard Armory in Interbay; the central corridor meeting at Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle; the southern corridor meeting at West Seattle High School in West Seattle. There were over 200 attendees in downtown Seattle, and over 100 each at Interbay and West Seattle. Each meeting lasted about three hours.

Attendees were given a comment form that had 13 questions concerning the information presented. Over 140 comment forms were received. In addition to submitted comment forms, project team members answered questions and heard first hand from attendees at each of the stations. While there was some consensus among respondents at the three meetings, some questions evoked varying responses depending on the meeting location. This summary includes responses given both on comment forms and to staff members.

Common Themes

Most of the attendees either use the Viaduct daily or weekly to both bypass and go to downtown. Most drive their car on the Viaduct either alone or with a passenger. Residents were the largest group of attendees with a small number of people attending whom own businesses in the project area.

Overall, most respondents felt that giving priority to transit, whether it is more ferries from West Seattle to downtown or more bus service to and from Seattle neighborhoods, was the best way to keep people moving during construction.

In all three meetings, the most common response favored getting construction done as quickly as possible, even if it meant intense traffic disruption. They reasoned that since even a partial closure of SR 99 would be substantially disruptive to traffic patterns, the best option would be to get it over with as quickly as possible. However, others thought cost was the most important factor, or did not support the tunnel option and felt that the questionnaire was overly focused on the tunnel as the preferred alternative. These sentiments tended to break down by neighborhood.

Downtown

People at the downtown meeting were generally enthusiastic about the proposed tunnel and want to see construction moving as soon as possible. A majority of respondents live downtown and are excited at the prospect of integrating the waterfront with the downtown area. Since many also walk to work downtown and use the Viaduct less frequently, they were concerned about pedestrian access and noise levels more often than transit or commuting problems.

The high number of respondents who live downtown at this meeting also predicted their level of support of the recommended surface street location. They liked having the waterfront as the primary center of activity, with wide promenades for pedestrian use. Similarly, a majority of people was in favor of the lowered Aurora Avenue improvements because it offered better pedestrian access for the South Lake Union neighborhood.

Major concerns at this meeting centered on the impact of construction noise or diverted traffic patterns on residents and businesses. Some business owners expressed concern that eliminating street parking would deter customers from coming downtown. The potential for rising costs was also a concern for many attendees. For this reason, many people either did not support the tunnel or felt that the additional improvements to Aurora Avenue were an unnecessary expense.

Interbay

Respondents at Interbay were much more concerned about the upcoming construction, and many expressed doubt that they would get any benefit from the proposed tunnel. A vast majority use the Viaduct daily or weekly and depend on it as their route from north to south Seattle to bypass or access downtown. Most respondents lived north of downtown and this meeting also had the most representatives from the freight community, which depends heavily on the Viaduct to transport goods.

Unlike the other two meetings, respondents were equally divided in their views of construction priorities. Since there was a general consensus that the Viaduct lacked alternate routes, many people felt that any complete closure of SR 99 would be disastrous for commuters. Thus, reducing closures of SR 99 was a relatively higher priority for this group.

Similarly, people were divided on their support of the transportation management goals, often depending on their support of the tunnel. While some were positive about the improved waterfront area and transit alternatives, many were skeptical that any efforts would make construction tolerable for commuters and the freight community. Many also saw the lowered Aurora Avenue improvements as an add-on that would drive up already high costs without providing much benefit for residents beyond the South Lake Union area.

Overall, major concerns at this meeting focused on construction duration and the utility of replacing the Viaduct with a tunnel. There were many respondents who were not convinced that the tunnel was the best option for the city as a whole, in light of added cost and time.

West Seattle

Comments at the West Seattle meeting balanced between the enthusiasm voiced at the downtown meeting and the deep concern heard at Interbay. Most people indicated that they live south of downtown or in West Seattle. Like Interbay, a vast majority of respondents depend on the Viaduct daily or weekly to access or bypass downtown, and lack alternate routes to travel from south to north. Many however, take the bus on the Viaduct, significantly more so than at the other meetings.

A majority of people agreed with the transportation management goals presented at the meeting, perhaps because many already use mass transit. Many commented that increased transit options, such as year-round water taxis, would be critical during construction. Because West Seattle is so dependent on the Viaduct to access downtown, their major concern is being completely cut off during construction, which is why many favored getting construction done as quickly as possible.

Most respondents agreed with the recommended surface street location and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to tie the waterfront to the city. Many comments were in favor of the enhanced pedestrian access the plan would offer. Some people expressed concern over rising costs, especially when paired with the option of making improvements to lowered Aurora. While some saw the benefit of connecting the streets and improving access to Aurora, others felt that the priority should go to fixing the Viaduct, particularly since it is being presented as a safety issue.

Other Agency Comments

Other agencies had the opportunity to comment on the information presented at the public meetings. The Port of Seattle identified several areas of concern specific to the freight and shipping community. In general, they expressed a desire to see more analytical work done to ensure that the design for the Viaduct provides adequate mobility for all modes of travel.

The Seattle City Council had the opportunity to hear a broad summary of comments from the meetings, and to ask questions about the information presented. They were generally concerned with transportation management and alternatives for transit during construction, as well as the costs of lowering Aurora Avenue.

Advertisement for the Open Houses

The public meetings were heavily advertised throughout the project corridor using postcards, posters, newspaper ads, announcements in community newsletters, listserv announcements, media briefings, and booths at fairs and festivals.