

West Seattle High-Rise Bridge Safety Program

Mayor's Online Town Hall

November 16, 2020

5 – 6:30 PM

Presenters:

- Andrés Mantilla, Director, Department of Neighborhoods
 - Mayor Jenny Durkan, City of Seattle
 - Greg Nickels, Co-Chair, Community Task Force
 - Paulina Lopez, Co-Chair, Community Task Force
 - Sam Zimbabwe, Director, Seattle Department of Transportation
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Event overview

Before reaching a critical decision point about repair or replacement of the West Seattle High-Rise Bridge, Mayor Jenny Durkan hosted a West Seattle Bridge Town Hall to hear directly from community members—both those who are dealing with the loss of the connection to the West Seattle peninsula and those in the Duwamish Valley acutely feeling the traffic impacts.

The Town Hall event gave participants a chance to hear from Mayor Durkan, key Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) staff, and Community Task Force leadership about recently completed work to stabilize the bridge and reduce the traffic impacts of the closure, updated information for both repair or replacement pathways, and ongoing opportunities for communities to provide feedback. The second half of the event offered an opportunity for community members to submit questions to panelists.

Over 400 people attended the event, which was hosted online via Zoom. Interpretation and closed captioning were available, and participants were encouraged to submit questions in the Q&A feature in Zoom or to the program inbox at WestSeattleBridge@seattle.gov.

You can watch a recording of the event on SDOT's YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzj4kqmPHIk>

Remarks and presentations

Andrés Mantilla, Director of Department of Neighborhoods, welcomed participants and introduced **Mayor Jenny Durkan**. Mayor Durkan thanked residents, the Community Task Force, City Councilmembers, and SDOT staff for their involvement. She noted her efforts to hear from West Seattle and Duwamish Valley residents, and emphasized that they are seeking the safest, fastest option with the highest degree of certainty and lowest degree of impact to communities.

Former mayor Greg Nickels and **Paulina López**, Community Task Force (CTF) co-chairs, noted that the CTF has been going about this process as carefully and quickly as possible and

hearing as many diverse voices as possible, and has sought to make sure that an equity and mobility lens is applied. They also noted that the decision-making process has not impacted the speed with which the City can respond.

Sam Zimbabwe, Director of the Seattle Department of Transportation, presented on the tremendous work completed on the West Seattle High-Rise Bridge since its closure in March 2020. Mr. Zimbabwe provided updates on ongoing stabilization work on the High-Rise Bridge, efforts to improve mobility and safety through the Reconnect West Seattle Program, and changes coming to Low Bridge access with the introduction of automated enforcement later this year. He reviewed the main two pathways currently under consideration—to repair the bridge or to implement a rapid replacement of the bridge’s superstructure—reflected on funding opportunities, and shared next steps for community engagement efforts.

At the end of the Q&A session, **Mayor Jenny Durkan** thanked participants for their questions and the CTF for its helpful feedback and work, noting that the recommendation from that group was closely split between repair and replace. She also observed that, regardless of their viewpoint about repair and replace, people tend to have shared values: safety is everyone’s top priority, and everyone wants to know the same things about the bridge pathways under consideration: how long it will take, how much it will cost, and how long it will last. She also noted that she is working with the Governor and the congressional delegation to communicate that this is one of the most essential corridors in our state and ensure an optimal outcome for our city and region.

Questions and answers

We received over 150 questions and comments in the Q&A field; the moderator grouped them together to enable the panelists to address as many as possible during the event.

Can the lower bridge be open to all users on weekends and after 7 PM on weekdays? Can it be open to a certain segment of essential workers (e.g., healthcare workers)?

Response: *Director Sam Zimbabwe (SZ)*: There is an internal SDOT group and an external stakeholder group representing healthcare, maritime, and business communities looking at this issue. We need to maintain access for freight and emergency vehicles, and when we opened up access between 9 PM and 5 AM earlier this summer, we saw a major spike in usage. Later this year, the addition of automated photo enforcement will open opportunities and allow us to have a more tailored approach to Low Bridge access.

What about Low Bridge access for Harbor Island workers?

Response (SZ): We know that the closure of the bridge is a real challenge for Port workers, and we know that Harbor Island workers need to have access to get dispatched across the bridge and access Terminal 5. We’ve had an ongoing discussion on how to support that workforce.

Why is more attention not being paid to North Delridge and Delridge, who are dealing with other construction projects, such as RapidRide H Line?

Response (SZ): When we planned the RapidRide H Line construction before the start of the bridge crisis, we tried to be considerate and divide work into smaller pieces over time. We are also trying to make RapidRide improvements to provide more immediate transit access to help mitigate access issues created with the bridge closure. We know the closure has been having an ongoing impact on communities and are working to minimize that. As part of the larger Reconnect West Seattle program, we are also working on other ideas for how to improve connections in the North Delridge community

With the declaration of the bridge emergency, did we miss out on any funding opportunities? And, with the change in federal administrations, will there be more support for infrastructure?

Response: *Mayor Jenny Durkan (JD)*: We didn't miss out on federal funding with the emergency declaration, as there was no significant funding source available at that time. I have been meeting regularly with our congressional delegation and the governor to position Seattle to be at the head of the line for federal funding when it becomes available.

How does this work overlap with Sound Transit's (ST) planning? Are you working with ST to move forward the elevated light rail option with the junction at SW Avalon St?

Response (SZ): Sound Transit is currently in an environmental permitting process for the Ballard to West Seattle Link light rail connection, which SDOT has been coordinating with. The whole of the ST program is still uncertain due to COVID-19 funding impacts, so they are looking at their whole capital program with their board (now and through next summer) to assess these impacts, including how funding changes will affect the timeline of capital investments. We are still trying to understand whether there are different opportunities. If replacement is the option that is moved forward, it's possible that this could include a shared facility, but this would not be possible with repair. This will come from further discussion with ST.

Response (JD): I sit on the ST board, which in December will be looking into whether there may be delays. However, with both the repair/replace options, there are challenges with adding light rail because of engineering constraints. With repair, we won't be able to add new lanes for light rail. This is a challenge with replacement as well, because the bridge will be using existing supports, which also makes it difficult to add new lanes. We will continue to work with ST regardless, but one thing we've learned is that we need more redundancies in the connections with West Seattle.

What is the reason for the reduction in speed limits along W Marginal Way SW? Is SDOT monitoring the data?

Response (SZ): SDOT has been making an effort to reduce speed limits across the city for Vision Zero. We've found that decreasing speed limits and increasing signage has resulted in lowered collision rates. We also realize that collisions cause huge delays, so if we have a

serious collision on one of these arterials, this could further impact the ability to get around. For example, a recent incident required shutdown of the roadway for hours. So, if everyone can go a little bit slower, everyone can get where they need to go more safely and reliably.

When will the repair/replace decision be made? What does the next 6 months look like?

Response (SZ): We haven't lost time on any pathway since the day the bridge closed. Both repair and replace pathways do have substantial risks before we can restore traffic, including how the bridge responds with a repair scenario. We have substantial work to make sure we address the risks we see and are prepared for any event and don't lose any time in restoring the connection.

What was being done to provide funding for the High-Rise Bridge prior to the emergency declaration? Was there a capital improvement plan (CIP) in place?

Response (SZ): SDOT was tracking cracking back to 2013, but we didn't see any reason to expect that it would be an issue and continued to do needed maintenance at higher rates than are required by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). It was in good shape at that time and it was not on the concern list, as it was in better condition than many other bridges around the city. Because our bridge maintenance efforts are conditions-based, there was not a CIP in place, but we were able to identify the cracking because of our regular inspection schedule for bridges. Since the bridge has been closed, we have done what's called non-destructive evaluation. The steel inside is still in good strong condition, and epoxy grouting has restored the strength of the steel.

Response (JD): We did tap into SDOT funding to get where we are today. We were fearful that the bridge could fail, which would create safety and mobility issues, so stabilization was the first thing we prioritized. Some people have asked about why this was done if the bridge will be demolished, but we could not take the risk that the bridge would fail.

Does the \$916 million cited in the presentation for the repair option include the cost of eventually replacing the bridge?

Response (SZ): This is from the Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), and it includes up-front capital costs, maintenance, replacement costs through the year 2100, and how much value would be left in the bridge at that time. If we go the repair route, a bridge would need to be replaced more quickly, but might still have some life left by 2100. If we go the replacement route, the bridge would likely need to be replaced again before 2100, so this is factored into these long-term cost estimates. The two alternatives that we are now looking at, repair and rapid replacement, were the most comparable in the CBA, which is why we have moved them forward.

Response (JD): Other options were considered, including a full bridge replacement and a tunnel. These were both eliminated due to feasibility, which we determined through both technical and task force efforts.

Are there plans to increase the hours or frequency of bus service, in partnership with King County Metro, or plans for community shuttles or park and rides near the bridge?

Response (SZ): Over 80% of voters supported Proposition 1, which helps us fund transit service through Metro. We identified West Seattle Bridge mitigation as part of this work, and partnership with King County Metro will help us to add some service to connect West Seattle. There are some opportunities for community shuttles or vanpools, but with diminished capacity due to COVID-19 pandemic right now, this is a challenge. As we get back to transit carrying more people, those are all parts of how we will think about Reconnect West Seattle and parts of our mitigation plans.

Are there opportunities to increase the frequency of water taxi service?

Response (SZ): We are working with King County Metro to make sure that this can increase, especially as COVID-19 recovery happens and commuting increases.

Response (JD): Since the outset, we've been working with Executive Dow Constantine to look at how this service can be expanded. But we are looking at every opportunity we can to increase mobility until the bridge reopens.

How is SDOT prioritizing out-of-work construction workers or workers of color in bridge construction efforts?

Response (JD): We are working to try to make sure that WMBE contractors and especially Black contractors can get access to these family-wage jobs.

Is the City working with major employers to ensure that remote work is an option?

Response (SZ): From the beginning of the closure, we have been working with employers and employees to support commute options and remote work. This has helped mitigate the closure of the bridge already and will continue to be an important consideration through COVID-19 recovery.

Originally, it was said that repair would happen regardless, and that the bridge could reopen as soon as 2021. Why isn't that true anymore?

Response (SZ): I don't think that SDOT has said that we could repair and replace simultaneously, as we would need to demolish the bridge to move forward with replacement. We've been consistent that with repair, reopening would need to be in 2022, given that we need to know how the bridge responds to stabilization efforts in order to know what repairs would be needed. There hasn't been inconsistency in terms of timing or approach. But in a repair scenario, we would have to plan for a replacement regardless, which would need to happen as soon as possible to avoid emergency closure without a plan.

Response (JD): We've always said we wouldn't eliminate any options, so we've looked at all scenarios simultaneously. But we've never said we would repair and then immediately demolish and replace.

What are the criteria for vehicles to access the Low Bridge?

Response (SZ): 10,000 gross vehicle weight is the threshold considered to be a freight vehicle. We've had limited exemptions for Harbor Island workers and have worked with business organizations to provide business passes. As we move into photo enforcement, we will have more flexibility, as we won't need to have a pass-based system and will hopefully have some increased capacity.

Are there limitations on access to federal funds for specific courses of actions (for example, for the repair or replace scenarios)?

Response (JD): In general, funding has to do both with what's available and with the timing of when it's available. We hoped that the second federal COVID-19 relief package would come through this summer, but now we don't think that Congress will take up infrastructure funding until the middle of 2021. It should be easier to get funding for a bridge that is out than one that is just needing repair. However, the bigger funding need (the replacement option) will be harder to put together because of pent-up demand for infrastructure funding around the country. We will be talking with Director Zimbabwe about how to put together this funding as the decision-making process happens.

Response (SZ): There may be easier pathways for some of these replacement funding streams, but as the Mayor noted, the upfront costs are an order of magnitude higher.

Are car ferries from Fauntleroy to downtown being considered?

Response (SZ): We've been working with Washington State Ferries to be as creative as possible here. There is very limited dock space at Colman Dock and other limitations at the Fauntleroy terminal, but we haven't cracked the nut on how to utilize ferry terminals to improve mobility. For example, a lot of the ridership from Vashon to Fauntleroy is actually heading south, not to downtown.

Response (JD): There are also some environmental limitations due to ferry wakes and speed, so the travel times have not been as favorable as we had hoped.

The 1st Ave S Bridge and South Park Bridge are currently being used as alternatives for traffic. If either of these are closed, it would have severe impacts. Are other transportation routes being considered? What is the plan to maintain these bridges?

Response (SZ): 1st Ave S Bridge, which is managed by WSDOT, is also seeing some maintenance challenges. We are working closely with WSDOT for these repairs, which will require some lane closures in the future. The South Park Bridge, which is a County-owned

bridge that the City operates, was recently replaced. The irony is that this community didn't have a bridge until recently, but now this bridge has additional traffic because of the West Seattle Bridge closure, which is impacting the South Park community. SDOT is continuing to be vigilant in our inspections of these and other bridges.

What is the City's plan to address economic impact to homeowners and business owners, including now that the Governor's recently announced order is putting new strain on businesses?

Response (JD): I met with the Small Business Advisory Council recently to discuss this and the recent COVID restrictions, which we realize are devastating. We know West Seattle businesses are struggling. We are working with the Governor's office to see if we can get additional state funding. The City is working with other programs for rent subsidy for workers or business owners, including those areas that are more impacted, like West Seattle. You also have great advocates in councilmembers Mosqueda, Gonzales, and Herbold, who are all working to minimize the impact on businesses and workers.

Did the Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) take into account the impact to West Seattle Bridge residents and businesses?

Response (SZ): This was taken into account in the CBA, but our ability to do so fully is limited, especially given the uncertainty created by COVID impacts. However, we know the longer the bridge closure lasts, the more impacts there will be.

As you continue to engage the community, what's next for the task force and how can the community continue to be involved?

Response (SZ): The co-chairs have facilitated the Community Task Force at a breakneck speed and are continuing to meet bi-weekly. This group will be meeting this upcoming Thursday and the Wednesday after the Thanksgiving holiday to discuss its future. Regardless of the pathway, we hope to keep working with this group, which has been instrumental in supporting the repair/replace decision and the efforts to mitigate traffic impacts. In addition to the task force's efforts, SDOT will continue to share regular updates and information broadly.