Transit + Streets
Frequently Asked Questions

Seattle's Alaskan Way Viaduct and downtown seawall were damaged by the February 2001 Nisqually earthquake. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WS-DOT) and City of Seattle examined five schemes to replace the Viaduct, only considering solutions that build a new segment of highway in the same location. WS-DOT, Mayor Nickels, and Seattle City Council selected the tunnel option as the preferred alternative, and preparation of the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this plan is underway.

The People's Waterfront Coalition advocates removing this segment of highway and not replacing it with another. Instead we propose Transit + Streets: a multimodal, reduced-capacity solution, where streets, transit, and I-5 are improved to accommodate these trips away from the shore. Our vision is a dynamic water's edge, with parks, beaches, recreation paths, event spaces, and an urban street integrated into a functional shore ecology.

DON'T WE NEED THAT HIGHWAY? WHERE WOULD TRAFFIC GO INSTEAD?

The Viaduct carries 105,000 vehicles per weekday in its busiest stretch. Roughly 40% of those trips exit SR-99 for destinations in downtown Seattle, and 60% bypass downtown.

Under the PWC's proposed plan, other parts of the system would be improved to shift trips to arterial streets, transit, and I-5 where there is unused capacity.

- Catalyze development to create **denser, more walkable neighborhoods**, making it easier to work, shop and play close to home —and car use will naturally decline.
- Connect existing **underused arterial streets** like Dexter Avenue, Sixth Avenue, and Airport Way to offer multiple choices for north/south routes for vehicles.
- Improve **traffic flow** through the downtown grid by timing traffic signals, repairing missing links, untangling bottlenecks, and potentially making more streets one-way.
- Optimize **I-5** for through trips by fixing the "weaving" problems, keeping 3 lanes northbound, and potentially reconfiguring the express lanes.
- Build a **4-lane urban street** on the waterfront, the same width as Alaskan Way.
- Improve and coordinate light rail, future Bus Rapid Transit, streetcars and pedestrian ferries to improve **transit** convenience instead of driving.
- Invest in **freight priority lanes** on freight corridors to keep freight moving on surface streets and an improved I-5.

With our proposal, we estimate 50% of the trips will shift to other roads, 25% will take advantage of better transit, and 25% switch to biking, walking or just won't happen.

WHAT ABOUT FREIGHT MOBILITY – HOW WILL TRUCKS GET AROUND?

While the Viaduct is a popular truck route between Seattle's two industrial areas, the actual number of daily freight trips is fairly low. Roughly 4,000 trucks use it daily, about 4% of the total trips. PWC proposes that Seattle invest in dedicated freight lanes on surface arterials and a reorganized I-5, and give trucks priority use of these lanes.

Keeping freight moving is important throughout Seattle, because the restaurants, stores, and businesses in EVERY neighborhood rely on efficient distribution. Through research of other cities, we've learned that investing in freight-only lanes and freight priority access on a surface network of truck routes is likely more cost-effective than investing multiple billions in a single route that only handles a fraction of total freight trips. Denser cities with bigger economies and fewer highway miles have solved the freight mobility problem. Given the high cost of new highways, Seattle should consider these cost-effective solutions too.

The Port of Seattle's container traffic doesn't depend on the Viaduct. 70% of the containers come and go by rail, and the remaining 30% traveling by truck are bound for I-5 and I-90 and local destinations south of the Port. The viability of this industry requires access to rail facilities and to I-5 and I-90, which can be achieved independent of the Viaduct question.

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE "TRANSIT + STREETS FIRST" SOLUTION WORKS?

We're advocating the City examine, test, and refine a Transit + Streets First option, so we all have accurate data for comparison. There are three reasons we are confident in it:

- Regional and city transportation planners with years of experience and specific knowledge about Seattle helped prepare -- and believe in -- this solution.
- Other cities have removed highways and reduced capacity successfully. Typically, highway planners say it won't work, and point to their computer models that predict gridlock. But each time they were wrong. In the real world, people prove to be a lot more flexible than computer models assume.
- Officials are proposing fixes to roads and transit so Seattle can get by without the Viaduct during construction. After we live without it for 2-4 years (or more), we will have already adjusted to life without it.

LOCAL POLITICIANS SAY WE NEED THE HIGHWAY. WHY DON'T YOU?

Because of irrefutable evidence of other cities achieving excellent mobility with less highway capacity per capita than Seattle. A comparison of highway miles vs. congestion in cities reveals that having more highways doesn't relieve traffic congestion, and having fewer doesn't necessarily worsen it. There is mounting evidence that urban highways actually contribute to congestion by enabling sprawl and long commutes, inducing car-dependent lifestyles, impairing flow in the street grid, and making places hostile to walkers and bikes.

Other cities have torn down urban highways, and are reaping significant benefits for their communities and economies -- without impairing mobility. Some leading transportation experts advise against any further investment in urban highways for practical reasons:

- Construction costs are nearly impossible to fund since Federal funding dried up
- Larger societal and environmental problems-- global warming, dependence on foreign oil, asthma and obesity public health epidemics – are increasingly linked to car-dependent transportation/development patterns
- Demand for driving is already dropping. Several demographic and market trends -- most significantly rising gas prices -- indicate this downward trend will continue.

A new report from the Victoria Transport Policy Institute concludes **"It may be better to anticipate these trends by investing in alternative modes and creating less automobile-dependent communities."**

Several great cities are a few steps ahead of Seattle in creating less car-dependent communities. Vancouver, San Francisco, and Portland have all prioritized investment in transit, freight, and bike and pedestrian infrastructure over cars. London's success with congestion pricing has inspired other cities to try aggressive disincentives to driving in their cores. Copenhagen has stealthily turned parking lots into parks and reclaimed car lanes for bikes over 20 years; now their residents choose the car for only 1/3 of the trips they take. These successes show that making non-car modes more viable for more trips can be part of an effective transportation system and healthy economy.

In a 1998 study of 60 actual cases of highway capacity reduction in various cities, researchers found that not one experienced long-term traffic chaos or gridlock, despite dire warnings from highway planners. The study found an average of 25% of the trips that had used the facility stopped happening when the road was removed. **With advance notice and identified alternative routes, people find other ways to get around.** Computer models don't show this, but real world evidence effectively proves it.

WHAT CAN SEATTLE LEARN FROM SAN FRANCISCO?

In San Francisco, two citizens' initiatives to remove the Embarcadero Freeway were both defeated, indicating a majority of citizens believed the highway department: they couldn't afford to lose that highway. When the 1989 earthquake took out the highway, they found out otherwise. City leaders decided to not replace all the lost capacity and use the opportunity to regenerate a healthy neighborhood on the water. There was no noticeable increase in congestion elsewhere; officials estimate that 40% of the car trips that had used the facility daily stopped happening. San Francisco enjoyed a strong economy for the following decade, attracting unprecedented development to this area. And they liked the results so much they tore down a second elevated highway, the Central Freeway, replacing it with a pedestrian friendly surface boulevard with about 50% of the vehicular capacity.

BUT THE STATE GOVERNMENT INSISTS ON BUILDING A NEW HIGHWAY.

We believe that WS-DOT is working toward a narrower goal than this opportunity demands. Their focus is to maintain the vehicular capacity on this facility, and they stated at the start of the project they would not allow other approaches. They have refused to consider a lower cost, reduced capacity solution because of this restriction. We believe this limitation is shortsighted, ignoring the public funding shortage, rising fuel prices, and our city's commitment to reduce car-dependence. We believe it's smarter to invest in better transit and a more robust street grid **now,** when there is so much to gain through reclaiming the downtown shore.

The City of Seattle owns the public land on which the highway sits, and has power to issue construction permits or not, so local officials do have some authority over what is built.

Citizens across the country have stopped construction of highways in their neighborhoods when they judged the costs to outweigh the benefits. Seattle citizens blocked several new highways in the 1970's -- not only to save their communities, but also to slow down the sprawl and increased congestion they rightly understood new highways would generate. Other cities have successfully adopted similar non-highway solutions when faced with their own crumbling infrastructure and funding shortfalls, with the cooperation of their state DOTs. If we want to create a better future for Seattle's mobility and livability, this is an important opportunity to invest wisely toward that vision.