WHAT YOU PROBABLY DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE TUNNEL

A tunnel seems like a good idea, right? The traffic is tucked out of sight, and Seattle gets its waterfront back. Who could be against that? We are, and here is why:

Urban highways: part of the problem, not part of the solution

Seattle does not have a shortage of road capacity. We have more highway space per resident than 50 of the 75 biggest cities in the US -- including all four of the cities with bigger ports. Our problem is that we sprawled, and car travel in our region increased at three times the rate of population and job growth between 1980 and 1990. Twenty years of analysis has shown that no city has won the congestion battle with more highways. There is no 'enough.' When an approach fails time and again, why keep using it? WS-DOT's own future projections expose their flawed thinking: a new shore highway only delays the expected time I-5 becomes too full to flow by 9-13 years.

Smart transportation experts challenge the economics of any further investment in urban highways. By the time a new highway started today is finished, baby boomers will be retiring, walkable lifestyles will be much more valued, and gas prices will be significantly higher. Many market and demographic trends point toward a future society that drives less. 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."

With advance notice and identified alternative routes, highway removal has never - *never* – resulted in gridlock. A 1998 study of capacity reduction in sixty cities showed an average of 25% (and up to 60%) of trips on those facilities simply disappeared; they didn't even take an alternate route. San Francisco recently removed their waterfront highway, and liked the results so much they took down a second one.

Seattle needs more travel choices, not highway capacity. The best strategy for urban mobility creates dense, walkable neighborhoods and links them by convenient transit. See www.peopleswaterfront.org for how our No-Highway solution redistributes most viaduct trips within the larger transportation network with improved roads and transit, focuses investment in walkable neighborhoods, and prioritizes freight.

Megaprojects –inaccurate forecasts, delays, overruns

Analysis shows budgeting megaprojects accurately is nearly impossible because of their complexity -- and the stark reality of an unknowable future. Despite best intentions, megaprojects have a calamitous history of inaccurate forecasts, with 50% to 200% cost overruns common, and actual usage often falling far short of estimated need. Without independent oversight, agencies and planning consultants sponsoring megaprojects can be tempted to use data to advocate the project, muddying the cost /benefit picture for citizens.

Channel tunnel: 80% cost overrun, 140% financing costs, ½ the projected revenues
Denver Airport: 200% cost overrun, 16 months late, ½ the projected traffic
Big Dig: 275% cost overrun, years late, significant leaks, unfinished
Bay Bridge: Bid 100% over budget, scrapping preferred design to lower costs
Sound Transit: 50% over budget to build half promised system, not yet constructed

Even if the tunnel megaproject goes over budget by just 25%, who will provide the extra billion? Would non-critical elements – lid extensions, shoreline improvements, pedestrian and bike amenities – ever survive the likely budget cuts? If we started constructing this urban tunnel, in fill, next to the sea, on a fault, and ran into trouble, could it be stopped?

This tunnel is NOT the one you're dreaming of.

"Tunnel" implies disappeared traffic and a usable surface, but this is not that kind of tunnel. For about half its length, the new highway will be on the surface or elevated. Six lanes of high-speed traffic will roar out of the ground at Virginia, and travel a new aerial structure to the Battery Street tunnel, just like the current viaduct bisecting Belltown. At Dearborn Street, the highway lid ends and a river of traffic about 180 feet wide continues south on the surface, permanently separating south Pioneer Square and the stadium neighborhood from the water -- and limiting future options for Terminal 46. Imagine, for a moment, the environment at the tunnel mouths.

The tunnel lid will always stay empty. It is not designed to bear buildings, ever: no new housing, no event or recreation destinations, no new civic development. The lid 'shelf' from Pike to Virginia will be on stilts to the west, with the highway out of view, but fully audible.

Is a new highway the best legacy we can leave?

A perched tunnel lid over a highway provides lousy conditions for what everyone hopes will be a great park. The highway and street plans are driving the design so far, and landscape architects and ecologists will have to make do with what is left. Trees will be limited to pre-designated tree pits; building destinations to activate the park will be strictly limited; landforms, plantings and built structures to shape smaller spaces will be limited by weight restrictions; and human access to the water will be restricted by the vertical seawall.

Seattle could instead reclaim this 150' to 200' wide strip of public land, on which to do whatever we want: parks, a modest 4-lane street, water and land-based recreation, event spaces, and perhaps new mixed-income housing or civic destinations. We could integrate these into a functional shore ecology with beaches and intertidal habitat, creating a modern urban / ecological park to advance the recovery of Elliott Bay. A new highway would abort this possibility: the seaward tunnel wall makes a vertical, hard-armored shoreline edge, negatively affecting marine ecology and salmon migration. The complex engineering of the subsurface kills any chance of low-tech surface rainwater collection/storage and its benefits: streams feeding new beaches, and reduced combined sewage overflow into the Bay.

Where are we going to get that kind of money?

Raising $4.3 billion for construction of this new highway is proving quite difficult.

- There is a $500 billion deficit in the federal government, and a firm NO from Patty Murray on a significant federal contribution
- While the State allocated $2 billion of gas tax revenues, this "matching grant" may go to another project if $2.3 billion more isn't raised locally within 2 years
- Final approval for any funding package will likely rest on local voters, who have rejected regional transportation taxes again and again.

The proposed new highway is a very expensive project for a small, limited base of users. Clark Williams-Derry, researcher for Northwest Environment Watch says "… the question of who else is going to pick up the tab for the Viaduct is pretty clear: Nobody. Nobody's going to ride to the city's rescue. If the city of Seattle wants to rebuild the Viaduct, Seattle residents are going to have to pay for the bulk of it."