

Just Tear Down the Viaduct!

by Jeremy M. Barker

The Alaskan Way Viaduct and the Seattle waterfront seawall are both crumbling, partly due to damage inflicted by the 2001 Niqually Earthquake. According to some experts, there is a 1 in 20 chance that, due to seismic activity, the Viaduct could become unusable within the next ten-years.

As such, the rush is on to fix the problem and figure out what to do with the 110,000 vehicles that use the Viaduct each day. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), in conjunction with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) have proposed five possible solutions to the problem, each a massive, expensive, long-term construction project.

The first is to rebuild the existing structure over 6-8 years at an estimated cost of \$3.2-\$3.5 billion. Other possibilities include: A larger, 6 lane surface highway, at a cost of \$2.5-\$2.8 billion over 6-8 years; A bypass tunnel, for \$3.1-\$3.4 billion; A full tunnel highway (the preferred option) for \$3.8-\$4.1 billion over 7-9 years; And finally, a 6-lane aerial super-highway soaring across the waterfront, at a cost of \$3.2-\$3.5 billion over a period of 9 to 11 years. According to WSDOT, at the moment, less than \$200 million dollars in funding for the project has been secured.

However, another more controversial option has been proposed by an independent organization: Just get rid of the Viaduct altogether.

The People's Waterfront Coalition (www.peopleswaterfront.org) has been shopping around their own proposal to city council members and other state officials, which envisions reconnecting downtown to the waterfront and spurring on new commercial and residential development by replacing the Viaduct with a street integrated into the city grid.

The coalition was formed by urban designers Cary Moon and Julie Parrett, both of whom took part in a brainstorming project curated by Allied Arts in October, 2003, called Seattle Strand. The purpose was to envision how to go about developing a more livable, forward-thinking downtown. Dealing with the nagging problem of the Viaduct, Moon and Parrett came to reject to prevailing wisdom, which held that the best solution was a huge underground tunnel, and instead proposed to eliminate the need for the Viaduct but improving and adding to existing highways and roads. Following Seattle Strand, Moon and Parrett got together with Grant Cogswell, one of the authors of the Seattle Monorail Project, and formed the People's Waterfront Coalition.

I met with Moon, Parrett and Cogswell at a downtown restaurant to discuss their plan. One of the basic ideas that emerged was that it was simply time to think differently. "For 50 years, the transportation solution in cities across the country has been to build highways," said Julie Parrett of WSDOT's highway proposals. "What we're asking for is someone to be visionary, we're asking to say, 'Look, we don't have to deal with transportation the way it was dealt with 50 years ago.' Because it's not how we commute anymore, it's not how we live in cities, it's not how we develop our infrastructure."

"The towns which have said no to freeways and have started investing in transportation, like Portland [Ore.] and Vancouver [B.C.] don't have insane gridlock," added Cogswell.

Instead of one massive project, their plan could be achieved in phases, which would make it easier on the city. Grant Cogswell pointed out that, "WSDOT staffers have really been honest about the costs of this project. They'll tell you up front: 24 hours a day of construction, seven days a week, seven to eleven years," two blocks from Second Ave. The impact of the noise and construction on Belltown's quality-of-life is potentially massive, but the economic impact is worse. With intermittent road closures for the better part of a decade, traffic and commute to Belltown businesses would be severely interrupted. As Cogswell caustically noted, it's an atmosphere in which "only the strong survive."

But beyond that, the People's Waterfront Coalition is trying to think beyond the Viaduct to envision long-term solutions to transportation and creating a more livable city. Components of their plan to deal with displaced commuters include expanding the street-car system to run to Capitol and First Hills. Cary Moon summed it up saying, "It's not about one corridor, it's about looking at



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the whole system and making the whole system work better."

But opposition to their proposal is strong. A document being prepared by SDOT on how traffic could be redirected if the Viaduct becomes unusable, the Central City Access Strategy could demonstrate that the Coalition's claim that the Viaduct is unnecessary is correct. But despite the fact the strategy was supposed to be released over a month ago, it has been postponed indefinitely. Grant Cogswell claims the document is being suppressed precisely because it proves Seattle "can live without" the Viaduct. ♦