Mark A. Emmert, President

September 23, 2010

Ms. Julie Meredith, P.E.
Program Director
SR 520 Bridge Replacement and HOV Project
Washington State Department of Transportation
600 Stewart Street, Suite 520
Seattle, WA 98101

Via electronic mail: MeredJL@wsdot.wa.gov

Subject: University of Washington comments on
ESSB 6392: Design Refinements and Transit Connections Workgroup Draft
Recommendations Report

Dear Ms. Meredith:

The University of Washington is in support of WSDOT’s Preferred Alternative for the SR 520 project. The collaborative efforts among many agencies in the last few years as well as the past few months to refine the Preferred Alternative have resulted in a stronger project.

As Governor Gregoire said at the press conference last April when she announced the Preferred Alternative, we have come a long way since we started with the Pacific Interchange. As you know, the University did not support that concept for several reasons, and we appreciate all of the time and hard work that has gone into this process to get many stakeholders to this point of support.

As a stakeholder, we also recognize that the Preferred Alternative reflects many other compromises that were made to balance the needs of all parties. An example of this is the compromise reached over the Lake Washington Boulevard Ramps. We support the Preferred Alternative’s design that removed those ramps from the sensitive area of the Arboretum, while maintaining most of the functionality for transit. The design retains capacity along Montlake Boulevard so that transit is not unduly delayed. Further changes to those ramps, such as permanent turn restrictions on 24th, would compromise transit flow on Montlake Boulevard. Another compromise was providing for a managed shoulder on the Portage Bay Viaduct in order to reduce the corridor’s width. Allowing traffic to use this shoulder during peak periods will reduce congestion along Montlake Boulevard, but also responds to the community’s desire to have a narrower Portage Bay Bridge. In addition, we applaud the work being done with the Arboretum and Botanical Garden Committee to create a set of mitigation measures, including ways to slow and decrease traffic in the Arboretum. We appreciate the attention that is being paid to this regional resource and know that the
December report to the Legislature will give it and other regulatory bodies involved in this project a set of measures that can enhance the Arboretum.

We view the second Montlake Bascule Bridge as a critical element to enhance pedestrian, bicycle, and transit access to the UW campus. The existing sidewalks on this bridge are too narrow to accommodate the increase in bicyclists who will be able to cross SR 520 on the new path. Transit, too, could be delayed as traffic has to merge from the SR 520 interchange area into the four existing (and narrow) lanes. The second bascule bridge will provide a very wide shared bike and pedestrian path, and provide two additional lanes that can be dedicated to transit. As you know, the UW’s transportation demand management program is dependent on these alternative modes of travel. We understand that the second bridge would be constructed late in the overall project schedule after other critical infrastructure is complete. However, it is integral to the SR 520 project and should not be eliminated later as a cost-saving measure.

Finally, we appreciate the time and energy put into the Montlake Triangle Charrette this summer by WSDOT, the Seattle City Council, SDOT, Metro, Sound Transit, the bike and pedestrian community, and members of the Seattle Design Commission to refine the Preferred Alternative’s plan for the Montlake Triangle area. As we stated early in the process, the University requested consideration of both a tunnel under Montlake Boulevard as well as the overcrossing of Montlake to ensure our collective decision was the right one for future generations. While the Regents and the City have already approved the original Sound Transit pedestrian bridge, we welcomed the opportunity to take a fresh look at the under- and overcrossing options.

During the charrette review of both options, the charrette participants identified the best undercrossing option to be a short, direct tunnel from the mezzanine level of the Sound Transit UW station to the southeast tip of the Triangle (south of the Triangle Garage), with elevators to the surface. As the report states, “The benefits of the undercrossing included a direct pedestrian connection from the University of Washington to the UW Sound Transit station, while providing a grade-separated crossing for light rail passengers, separating the majority of pedestrians from bicyclists, and facilitating an efficient connection between bus and rail. However, it became clear during the charrette that the undercrossing option did not provide an enhanced connection for regional bicycle and pedestrian users going to and from the University or the Burke Gilman Trail from the SR 520 regional trail and surrounding Seattle neighborhoods. Without this regional connection, the undercrossing option did not provide adequate regional benefit to non-Sound Transit users.” As a result, we understand that WSDOT could not commit to using public funds to pay for an undercrossing option.

While we feel the undercrossing has some significant benefits to the University of Washington, we also see the significant benefits to the University and the broader community of the overcrossing of Montlake which WSDOT can use public funds to support. As the report states, “The benefits of the selected overcrossing option include a direct connection from the UW Sound Transit station over Montlake Boulevard to the Montlake Triangle, then connection to the University of Washington main campus and the Burke Gilman Trail via the new Rainier Vista Land Bridge. The overcrossing option combined with the Rainier Vista Land Bridge would separate pedestrians and bicycles from vehicles and buses using Montlake Boulevard, while still allowing for enhanced at-grade pedestrian crossings at both the Montlake Boulevard/Pacific Street and Montlake Boulevard/Pacific Place intersections. The
overcrossing option/Rainier Vista land bridge provides multiple choices for regional and local bicycle users and efficient connections between transit modes in the Triangle area.” With the increase in bike and pedestrian traffic in this area as forecasted by Sound Transit, WSDOT and our own UPass success, we understand and support the report recommending the overcrossing as a refinement to the Preferred Alternative.

At a recent meeting of our Board of Regents, concern was expressed about the design of the new overcrossing (i.e., a Sound Transit Pedestrian bridge) and how it would be blended into the surrounding environment of the Montlake Triangle and Husky Stadium. As this project moves forward, our input into the design will come through the Architectural Commission as well as our Regents since they have final design approval for projects on campus, as outlined in our Memorandum of Agreement with Sound Transit.

The design refinements to the Montlake Triangle area as outlined in the ESSB 6392 Report joined the best elements of many projects—a bridge for pedestrians to access Sound Transit’s Link station, the Rainier Vista plan which improves regional mobility for bikes and pedestrians, enhancements to existing transit stops, and improved pedestrian and bicycle facilities. Achieving that vision, however, requires immediate action so that the improvements are in place when the Sound Transit station at Husky Stadium opens in 2016. Agreement on the overcrossing needs to be reached early in 2011 or Sound Transit will build its original approved bridge, foreclosing the opportunity to make the Rainier Vista land bridge a part of this regional plan.

On behalf of the University of Washington, thank you for including us in this process as you worked to refine the Preferred Alternative for the SR 520 project.

Sincerely yours,

Mark A. Emmert
President

cc: UW Board of Regents