

A solution for 520 bridge? by Arla Shephard *Publish Date:* 2006-09-29

The proposal for replacing the Evergreen Point Bridge that would most affect the U-District is now the one the city is most strongly considering. The Seattle City Council drafted a resolution yesterday that declared the six-lane Pacific Interchange option its preferred plan for rebuilding the bridge that connects Seattle with Bellevue and other eastside communities via State Route 520.

The plan would widen the bridge by two regular lanes and add two high-occupancy vehicle lanes. It would also remove the existing Montlake Boulevard highway interchange and create a new ramp on Pacific Avenue, right next to Husky Stadium and the UW Medical Center.

Though improving safety is the Washington State Department of Transportation's main goal in fixing the bridge, the Pacific Interchange option would also ease traffic congestion along the highway and on Montlake Boulevard, said Councilmember Richard Conlin.

Building the Pacific Interchange would improve traffic times along Montlake by up to 20 minutes, according to project's draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) commissioned by the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT).

Another huge benefit the council sees in going forward with the Pacific Interchange option is its ability to connect eastside transit lines with the link light rail station planned at Husky Stadium, Conlin said.

"I think it will make a huge difference in how likely people are to use transit and have huge benefits for the University,"; he said.

But the project would eliminate the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) building and parking lot and also cut into land owned by the Washington Park Arboretum, for which the UW Botanic Gardens manages the plant collections.

While WSDOT acknowledges "the increased height, greater thickness of structure and the eight-foot-high sound walls would make the bridge more prominent than it is today,"; some members of the UW community feel the proposal fails to take into account the project's direct effects on the Arboretum's sensitive ecosystems.

Members of the Arboretum and Botanical Garden Committee released a statement earlier this month expressing concern about the diminishment of the Arboretum's plant collections, including "one of the most important tree collections in North America."; They fear that the "loss of habitat"; in the "wildlife-rich and wetlands-sensitive areas"; would ultimately be a severe detriment to the city of Seattle.



PHOTO COURTESY | WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
An artist's rendering of the Pacific Interchange Option for the rebuilding of the Evergreen Point Bridge. The proposal would remove the existing highway interchange from Montlake Boulevard and place it on Pacific Street, just south of Husky Stadium.

"All proposals thus far would take Arboretum land and destroy valuable plantings -- one alternative even uses three times the space already taken up by 520 in the Arboretum and eliminates long-lived specimens planted during the fledgling years of the Arboretum in the '30s,"; the statement said.

The loss of the MOHAI building would also negatively affect the Arboretum. The committee members see this loss as potentially eliminating space needed "at the heart of the Arboretum for displays, educational opportunities and public meeting facilities.";

Not to mention, the view of and from the UW's Waterfront Activities Center (WAC) would be radically changed with the Pacific Street Interchange Option, which would put the Canoe House "nearly beneath the bridge structure as it approached the shoreline,"; the draft EIS said.

The Pacific Street Interchange Option would also include the construction of a new four-lane Union Bay Bridge, which would be highly visible from many points around Union Bay, dominating the views from Marsh and Foster Islands in addition to East Montlake Park.

This increased capacity, however, also means increased traffic volumes on local streets. As drivers take advantage of increased capacity on Montlake Boulevard, the Draft EIS anticipates an increase in traffic volume north of the Montlake Cut, on Northeast Pacific Street, 15th Avenue Northeast and Montlake Boulevard north of Pacific Street. North of the Montlake Cut, traffic could increase to up to 27 percent during the afternoon commute, whereas south of the Montlake Cut traffic would decrease by 46 percent.

Many intersections meanwhile would improve substantially, especially the Lake Washington Boulevard and SR-520 Arboretum ramp intersection, which would have its existing stop signs replaced with actual signals, eliminating severe congestion during peak hours.

At the site of the proposed Pacific Street interchange, an expansive pedestrian overpass would be constructed to accommodate foot traffic. This would create smoother pedestrian travel in the area surrounding the UW Medical Center and Husky Stadium, Conlin said.

If the Pacific Interchange option is chosen, the financial cost of the bridge project is estimated at about \$4.38 billion. At this point, only \$1.25 billion in funding has been identified -- "the rest of the funding hasn't been decided yet,"; Conlin said.

Jean Amick, a concerned Seattle resident who has been following this issue for the past ten years, believes that the costs are more than monetary.

"Any design will affect the campus for years to come. The Pacific Interchange will be disastrous for the campus and the Arboretum -- plus a monster eye sore for residents,"; Amick said.

Louis Hoffer, Ted Lane, and other Seattle residents who are members of the SR-520 Stakeholders Advisory Committee strongly advocate a tunnel or tube option, an alternative that WSDOT doesn't consider possible. WSDOT claims that the construction of a mass-transit tunnel/tube system is "environmentally unviable and economically infeasible";-- but Hoffer and others in his citizens' group disagree.

The SR-520 Stakeholders Committee wants WSDOT to use allocated funds from the state Legislature to conduct an engineering study that seriously takes into consideration the tunnel

option. Many feel the long-term benefits of an underground tunnel that could service more than cars and buses far outweigh its financial costs, especially in comparison to a viaduct system with an inherent and enormous negative community impact.

Members of other groups, such as the grassroots organization BetterBridge.org, have advocated the Pacific Interchange Option from the start.

For residents in the Montlake neighborhood, it is infinitely superior to a six-lane option that uses the existing interchange at Montlake Boulevard, said Jonathan Dubman, member of the BetterBridge.org steering committee.

Widening the bridge without moving the interchange would create a mess of pavement Dubman called "the Montlake monster.";

Moving the interchange north to Pacific Street would prevent traffic destined for the University from bottlenecking behind the Montlake drawbridge and clogging up residential areas, he said.

It also would keep neighborhood parks intact and offer the opportunity to create more open green areas, he said.

"There's a great opportunity to build something that blends in existing green belts and that is a better part of the landscape than we have now,"; he said.

The city council will vote Oct. 16 whether to forward the resolution supporting the Pacific Interchange plan to the 520 Bridge Executive Committee. That committee will in turn meet Oct. 27 to make its recommendation, which it will pass on to Gov. Christine Gregoire, who will make the final decision.

"In principle the governor could choose something completely antithetical to what we want, but we believe she'll listen to our recommendation,"; Conlin said.

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