



# City of Seattle

## Seattle Planning Commission

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February 3, 2011

Honorable Councilmember Sally J. Clark, Chair  
Committee on the Built Environment  
Seattle City Council  
PO Box 34025  
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

### RE: South Downtown Livability Resolution

Dear Councilmember Clark,

As noted in our September 23, 2010 Policy **Recommendations on South Downtown Neighborhoods**, while the Commission supports the proposed zoning changes we also recognize zoning changes are not sufficient to create the successful and livable transit community the City envisions. Therefore we offer comments and suggestions to be considered for the **“Livability Resolution”** that Council will adopt as an important companion piece to the land use ordinance.

In our recently release report, *Seattle Transit Communities – Integrating Neighborhoods with Transit*, we outline the essential components of livability and recommend specific key actions for the area around King Street Station and South Downtown. In addition, we believe that public investment in the pedestrian realm, public safety, support for business districts, and code enforcement are necessary complements to zoning changes that will help enhance South Downtown.

### **Make the Most of Major Opportunities**

- **The North Lot Development** will add many households to Pioneer Square who will activate the adjacent public space.
- **Yesler Terrace** which will be redeveloped over the next 15 years, will add numerous households and employment opportunities near South Downtown in a manner that could serve as a national model for the federal interagency partnership for Sustainable Communities.
- **The First Hill Streetcar** will improve connections within South Downtown and to Capitol Hill and provide an opportunity to improve the streetscape and pedestrian crossings along the route. The First Hill Streetcar will begin serving the area in 2013, supplementing the many transit opportunities already available in South Downtown.

## **Include the Necessary Components for Livability**

The *Seattle Transit Communities* report recommends “necessary components for livability” which help create neighborhoods supported by transit. For the South Downtown neighborhood, the Commission has identified specific improvements that will improve livability:

### ***Provide Breathing Room***

- Downtown Seattle has a limited amount of open space. In the South Downtown area, Pioneer Square and Occidental Park anchor the existing open space system, each presenting a palette of hard landscaping, tree planting, and other design features appropriate to an intense urban setting. City Hall Park and Kobe Terrace / Danny Woo Gardens offer greener respites from the din of urban life, although sloped areas, obstructed sight lines, and a lack of active building frontages limit lingering and pedestrian through-traffic. Activity and access to City Hall Park is additionally hampered by the cut-through street Dilling Way, the underground vehicle entry from 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and the grade separation from Yesler Way. Addressing the edge conditions at City Hall Park could help revitalize the area and provide better access.
- While not a formal “city square,” the area between King Street Station and Union Station serves as the nexus for motor vehicle, transit, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic moving east-west through South Downtown. It is also the gateway to the city for over 2.7 million travelers arriving by rail annually<sup>1</sup>. Currently, this area lacks a holistic urban design concept, a user-friendly wayfinding system, and a mobility strategy that considers vehicular and non-motorized travel modes. As the transit and multi-modal transfer “heart” of the neighborhood, transforming this *space* into a *place* should be a top priority.
- A series of smaller open spaces are scattered throughout the area. These spaces range in type from those that are owned, and maintained by the City (Washington Street Boat Landing, Prefontaine Place, Fortson Place, Hing Hay Park, International Children’s Park) to unofficial and interstitial spaces, expropriated by nearby business owners and operators (reclaimed alleyways and sidewalks) for the display of wares or seating. It is important to note that these informal spaces help infuse the area with an authentic, eclectic, and improvisational character. Where appropriate and with oversight for planning and general security, the City should support and encourage public use in this informal open space network as well as continue to search for opportunities for public parks, plazas, and connections.
- The Livable South Downtown Plan, the Yesler Terrace Redevelopment Plan, and the Central Waterfront Planning Process have identified (or, are in the process of identifying) future networks of Greenstreets, parks, and other urban design and landscape features that will help integrate natural systems functions into the public realm. Coordinating how these plans relate to and intersect with each other will be essential to establishing highly efficient and effective implementation programs.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.psrc.org/assets/3079/Seattle\\_King\\_Street\\_Multimodal\\_Hub.pdf](http://www.psrc.org/assets/3079/Seattle_King_Street_Multimodal_Hub.pdf) p.5

### ***Getting to Transit is Easy***

- The Waterfront / South Downtown / Yesler Terrace area is complex. Multiple street geometries collide. Transit and commercial freight operations coexist with pedestrians and bicyclists. Large transportation infrastructure components (such as I-5, the Alaskan Way Viaduct and future tunnel portals, the port, and heavy rail corridors) fragment the block pattern. Additionally, connections between major arrival and departure points for various transit modes are not easily discernable. Colman Dock, which provides cross-sound ferry service, is on a different street grid alignment than King Street Station, which provides national, regional, and commuter rail service. Although the two transit hubs are less than ten minutes apart on foot, almost no signage defines walkable routes or indicates where to find connecting buses or circulator shuttles. In the near term, clear wayfinding is essential to encourage multi-modal transit trips. Over the medium and long term, streetscape and public realm improvements (landscape and urban design, street furniture, Greenstreets, and cycle tacks) as well as signalization upgrades at key intersections will aid people in “getting to transit.”
- The South Downtown area is forecast to grow substantially in the coming decades. Identifying and supporting projects that balance growth, resources, and locational advantages is an important long term strategy for encouraging economic vitality and access to a diverse range of housing and job opportunities. In the near term, incentivizing modestly scaled model projects will help catalyze adaptive reuse and support context-appropriate new development in the future.

### ***Transit at the Center of Community***

- While King Street Station represents the center and linchpin of this transit community, the area is a multi-nodal, multi-modal transit hub with key stations and corridors at its periphery. Colman Dock provides ferry access to Bainbridge Island, Bremerton, and Vashon Island. The First Hill Street Car will run along Jackson and Broadway to connect South Downtown with First Hill, Pike/ Pine, and Capitol Hill. The International District is the South Downtown connection to LINK light rail. The streetcar will better connect South Downtown with its adjacent neighborhoods. When coupled with the significant bus service along the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue corridors downtown and with the bicycle routes coming from points south and east (the bicycle route across I-90 runs through King Street), the area can be considered the epicenter of transit in the region. As the plans progress for Colman Dock, Port-related freight mobility, the King Street Station Area, Livable South Downtown, and Yesler Terrace, inter-project coordination will be essential.
- The North Lot is arguably the most transit-rich and highest potential urban development opportunity in the Puget Sound Region. As the economy recovers, pressure to move this project forward will increase. The City should take the time now to fine tune the North Lot design to take advantage of the local and regional transit investment and to evaluate key program components (such as parking, housing and open space). The North Lot project will be a solid anchor the South Downtown area.

### ***Vibrant Street Life***

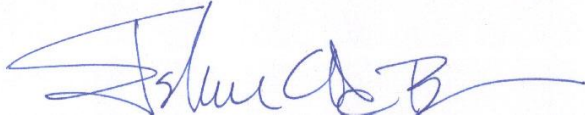
- Sidewalk width and quality vary throughout the King Street Station area as they have been constructed over time to support a diverse range of land use types and intensities. Improvements should implement generous standards for sidewalk width and quality and reduce pedestrian obstructions due to utility poles.
- Reclaiming alley space for pedestrian and commercial uses in Pioneer Square and the International District has improved local vibrancy, provided a tidy streetscape, and added natural pedestrian surveillance. However, widespread alley repurposing should be balanced with allowing vital access for city services, trash collection, local business operations, and property owners' back-of-house needs.
- Sidewalk displays, signage, food stands, temporary materials storage, and other vendors occupy the sidewalk space in many areas of the International District, giving the area an eclectic and improvisational character. The City should study how to accommodate these practices without inhibiting walkability and general safety.
- Streets in the International District have a wide variety of street frontage conditions, pedestrian activity and traffic volume. Ground related retail and residential uses should be encouraged where appropriate.
- Between South Downtown and Yesler Terrace, steep slopes and a lack of clear street connections impede foot traffic. Better non-motorized connections between these two areas will enhance the vitality of both.

### ***Community for All Ages***

- Identifying and supporting projects that balance growth, resources, and locational advantages is an important long term strategy for creating a diverse population and employment base. Incentives to support modestly scaled model projects will help catalyze adaptive reuse and support context-appropriate new development.
- South Downtown lacks several necessary components for families with children, including open space for play and schools within walking distance. Partnering with land trusts, developers, the Seattle School District, private school providers and others could help create the open space and schools that support a broad range of age groups and household types.
- Several senior residences are located toward the east of the area where slopes are steepest. Transit service targeted to assist these residents would improve their access to South Downtown and their overall mobility.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with our recommendations regarding the essential components for livability that will help create livable South Downtown neighborhoods. We look forward to assisting you as the City implementation process advances. Please contact me or our Director, Barbara Wilson at (206) 684-0431 if you have further questions.

Sincerely,



Josh Brower, Chair  
Seattle Planning Commission

cc: Mayor Mike McGinn  
Seattle City Councilmembers  
Diane Sugimura, Marshall Foster, John Skelton, Susan McLain, Dennis Meier, DPD  
Peter Hahn, Bob Powers, Tracy Krawczyk, Barbara Gray, Cristina Van Valkenburgh, Dorinda Costa, Darby Watson, Sara Robertson; SDOT  
Ethan Raup, Liz Birkholz, Rebecca Deehr; Mayor's Office  
Rebecca Herzfeld, Martha Lester; Council Central Staff

**SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION RECORD OF DISCLOSURE & RECUSAL:**

- Commissioner Josh Brower disclosed that his firm, Brower Law, represents developers of commercial and multifamily property throughout the city. He also disclosed that he has passive, non-managerial ownership interest in a property located within South Downtown that is not currently and would not in the near-term future be seeking any benefit provided by the proposed zoning changes.
- Commissioner Catherine Benotto disclosed that her firm, Weber Thompson, has done work for a private developer and SHA at the North Lot and works on projects adjacent to South Downtown.
- Commissioner David Cutler disclosed that his firm, GGLO, is working with SHA on the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace.
- Commissioner Colie Hough-Beck disclosed that her firm, HBB, is working on the Goodwill site project, SR519, the Viaduct replacement, and that the Port of Seattle is one of her clients.
- Commissioner Jeanne Krikawa disclosed that the SODO Business Association is currently one of her clients. Former work for SDOT included the Rainier Avenue corridor beginning at South Dearborn St. Former work for DPD included Third Avenue S. to S. Jackson St.
- Commissioner Amalia Leighton disclosed that she was formerly the co-chair of NPAC and that her firm, SvR is working on the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace and does work for the Port of Seattle.
- Commissioner Chris Persons disclosed that he is the Executive Director of Capitol Hill Housing which develops, owns and manages affordable housing projects throughout the City
- Commissioner Matt Roewe disclosed that his firm, VIA Architecture, has worked on private sector projects in the South Downtown neighborhoods in the past and is engaged with a design build team for the SR99 Bored Tunnel Project.