

# CHAPTER 2. Introduction

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# Chapter 2. Introduction

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In 1999, the City of Seattle’s Strategic Planning Office (SPO) and Seattle Transportation identified the need for comprehensive, multi-modal sub-area transportation planning in Seattle. While other jurisdictions complete long-range transportation plans for different parts of their city, the City of Seattle has not undertaken this level of transportation planning for many years. Sub-area planning studies identify and prioritize transportation improvements to accommodate growth in Seattle and address existing problems identified in neighborhood plans and by other planning efforts. The *Comprehensive Plan* and the *Transportation Strategic Plan* provide policy direction for sub-area studies.

Because of the magnitude of the University area’s transportation problems and citywide funding limitations, the City felt that the development of a “strategic” sub-area transportation plan covering the entire University area would be very important. The University Area Transportation Study’s (UATS) purpose is to evaluate and build upon all of the transportation improvements identified in previous planning efforts and fill any gaps in that work. The City envisions that the UATS will be a “blueprint” to guide transportation decision-making over the next ten years. Thus, the UATS was initiated as a pilot sub-area transportation study in January 2001.

The UATS covers several neighborhoods: the University District, Montlake, University Park and Ravenna. The study area is bounded by I-5 on the west, 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE on the east, NE 65<sup>th</sup> Street on the north and the Ship Canal and the Montlake interchange on SR 520.

## GOAL OF THE UATS

During the project scoping process, the City set the following goals for the UATS:

- To build on existing planning to provide a comprehensive, multi-modal transportation plan for the University area, and
- To serve as a blueprint for financing and programming transportation improvements in the University area over the next decade.

The City identified the following key tasks and products that would be needed to successfully carry out the UATS.

- Description of existing and future problems.
- Identification of improvements for all transportation modes: automobiles, transit, high occupancy vehicles, pedestrians, bicycling; and programs that reduce travel demand.
- Evaluation of the identified improvements.
- Discussion of potential funding sources to implement study recommendations.
- Development of recommendations with community input.

## **PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS**

At the beginning of the UATS in early 2001, City of Seattle Department Directors and selected staff members established key assumptions that defined broad direction for the UATS. The following were used as the fundamental building blocks to develop the potential transportation improvements:

### **Growth Assumptions**

The UATS used the Puget Sound Regional Council's 2010 and 2020 housing and employment forecasts as a starting point. However, those forecasts were modified to reflect development permits already issued by the City, those in the permit process and recent changes in land use plans.

### **State Facilities**

Although the City does not have responsibility to plan, construct, operate or maintain facilities within the State right-of-way, I-5 and SR 520 significantly affect the University area's transportation system.

City staff chose to include in the study potential transportation improvements located in the State rights-of-way. In addition, the project assumed that any improvements in the SR 520 corridor identified in Trans-Lake Washington Study would be implemented after the 2010 horizon of this study. The UATS identified transportation improvements that would be compatible with the Trans-Lake Study and/or that should be implemented in the near term.

## **Montlake Bridge**

Built in 1925, the Montlake Bridge links the University District with the Montlake and Capitol Hill communities. As a four-lane structure with six-lane approaches, the bridge severely constrains both vehicular and non-motorized traffic. It has historical significance and is a symbol for the community. City of Seattle Department Directors supported a staff recommendation that the UATS would not evaluate options that would increase the vehicle carrying capacity of the Montlake Bridge.

## **Sound Transit**

When the UATS was initiated, there was a considerable amount of uncertainty about how the first phase of Sound Transit's Central Link Light Rail Project would proceed. Questions regarding the system's financial feasibility, new schedule, and financial plan have been raised from various interest groups. Recently, the Sound Transit Board has affirmed its plan to build the light rail system, with higher costs and a longer time frame than was called for in the original *Sound Move Plan*.

This study makes the following assumptions about the future of the light rail system:

- ▶ The original light rail concept from Northgate to SeaTac through the University District in the Sound Move Plan will be implemented at a future date.
- ▶ The initial light rail segment will be constructed south of downtown Seattle. Therefore, light rail will not directly serve the University area by 2010.
- ▶ By 2020, light rail will be extended to Northgate from downtown Seattle. The extension of the light rail system beyond Northgate will take place some time after 2020.

## **Concurrency**

Concurrency is a planning tool that can address three factors that significantly affect the performance of a transportation system: 1) the level of traffic congestion that a community can accept; 2) the degree of investment in transportation facilities that a city can afford; and 3) the amount of growth that an area can accommodate. This study attempted to answer the question of whether those three factors are balanced today within the study area and, if so, whether they will continue to be balanced for the next ten years.

The UATS did not use the concurrency standards adopted in the City's Comprehensive Plan that are based on a volume to capacity ratio averaged at a screenline. The UATS developed a sophisticated computer model that translated anticipated population and employment growth into future travel increases in the transportation system network. The study then evaluated the transportation system's performance against benchmarks based on the corridor level of service measured for the roadway/vehicle system.

Traditionally, levels of service are measured at intersections. One goal of the study was to determine whether measuring level of service at the corridor level would provide better information about the degree of traffic congestion, and potentially provide a more comprehensive indicator of how the roadway system was performing. Information from this pilot study will be used by the City in future examination of concurrency policies.

### **Financial Limitations**

The UATS was not constrained within current transportation funding levels, so as not to preclude identification and evaluation of any new innovative ideas that could attract alternative funding sources. However, City of Seattle Department Directors instructed staff to monitor the UATS' financial feasibility and to identify needs for additional funding sources if existing sources were found to be inadequate. The UATS developed preliminary planning-level cost estimates for each identified improvement.

The City of Seattle has a major transportation funding shortfall. The City's 2001 transportation revenues were \$81.5 million. Seattle Transportation's list of unfunded projects and programs currently includes approximately \$135 million per year in major maintenance, safety, and mobility projects and programs.

The issue of transportation financing is citywide in scope and needs to be addressed in a broader context than the UATS study. However, the study team felt that it is important to consider additional revenue sources if new transportation facilities are warranted. Such sources may include:

- Imposition of development impact fees;
- Creation of local improvement districts;
- Establishment of a transportation benefit district;
- Dedication of property tax or employee tax for transportation improvements;
- Partnerships with the Washington State Department of Transportation through the Trans-Lake and I-5 projects;

- Clarifying City priorities for future investments by the U.W., King County Metro and other transit agencies; and
- Potential partnership opportunities involving the use of street rights-of-way, including street vacations.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The UATS sought broad public participation, and the following is a brief description of public involvement activities that took place during the course of the study.

### **Project Advisory Committee**

The City established a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) at the beginning of the study process. The PAC reviewed the products of the study on an on-going basis and provided comments and input to the study team. The PAC held monthly two-hour meetings. The PAC has closely reviewed the information contained in this report.

The following PAC members significantly contributed to the development of the recommendations in this report:

**Peter Dewey**, University of Washington

**Tim Dunn**, Community Transit

**Liz Gotterer**, King County Metro

**Megan Hoyt**, Seattle Transportation Department, City of Seattle

**Mike Podowski**, Strategic Planning Office, City of Seattle

**Susan Sánchez**, Strategic Planning Office, City of Seattle

**Eric Tweit**, Strategic Planning Office, City of Seattle

**Pauh Wang**, Seattle Transportation Department, City of Seattle

### **Pedestrian-Bicycle Working Group**

As part of the study's community outreach, the Strategic Planning Office and Seattle Transportation Department staff engaged the efforts of a citizens' committee with a strong interest in improving the pedestrian and bicycling system in the study area. The committee, called the Pedestrian-Bicycle Working Group, held monthly working sessions to discuss the UATS project.

They looked specifically at bicycle and pedestrian problems, needs, and opportunities because of their importance to the University area's transportation system and because these facilities are generally hard to "model" using traditional traffic models available in the UATS project. The Working Group contributed significantly to the

study with their knowledge of problem areas and with the development and evaluation of recommendations to enhance bicycling and walking modes.

### **UATS Advisory Group**

The study also sought input from leaders and representatives from citizens and the large number of neighborhood groups in the study area. The University Community Urban Center (UCUC) Sounding Board, which was formed to carry out neighborhood planning, met monthly and reviewed the products of the study. Midway through the study period, the UCUC Sounding Board discontinued its formal meetings, but the UATS project team continued to hold monthly meetings at the same time and place.

### **Public Open Houses**

The public was invited to two Open Houses to review the study findings and proposed transportation improvements. The first Open House was held in June 2001, and the second was in November 2001. Significant numbers of people (more than 50 individuals per Open House) viewed the display boards and asked questions of the study team members.

Two newsletters, included in the Appendix, were used to announce the public Open Houses.

### **Web Site**

The City developed an Internet web site to provide information and study products to the public as they were generated. All key products of the UATS were available on the Strategic Planning Office's web site.

## **ROLE OF THE REPORT**

The UATS recommends over 70 transportation improvements or strategies. Providing these improvements will be critical to the maintenance and enhancement of the community and neighborhood quality in the study area over the next ten years. Many of the recommendations are relatively inexpensive but will require commitments and dedication of City staff to implement them. If implemented in a timely fashion, these improvements will significantly improve mobility for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users. The most critical issue to be addressed in implementing the

recommended improvements is the lack of funding for transportation improvements throughout Seattle. A significant number of the recommended projects must be jointly carried out by the City and other transportation providers, including the Washington State Department of Transportation, King County Metro, Community Transit and Sound Transit.

The report also records all of the key steps taken by the UATS study team and other participants. Its publication represents the successful completion of project identification and evaluation- the project planning phase of the study. However, it also represents the beginning of project implementation- the second phase of the UATS. Funding and institutional constraints suggest that this phase will likely prove more challenging than the first.