

Westin Hotel Skybridge

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Commissioners Present

Ellen Sollod, Vice Chair
Brodie Bain (excused at 1:30)
Lee Copeland
Thaddeus Egging (excused at 12:00)
Grant Hromas
Martin Regge
John Savo
Ross Tilghman

Project Description

The Westin Hotel is requesting approval to retain an existing skybridge that connects the hotel to an adjacent parking garage. The skybridge crosses Virginia Street approximately 50 feet east of 5th Avenue. The approximately 200 stall parking garage was built for the hotel; it is now owned by a separate entity not affiliated with the hotel. The garage is available to both hotel customers and the general public. Use of the skybridge is restricted to hotel customers in the evening hours only. The skybridge has a secondary role in providing internet services from servers located in the garage to the hotel. Electrical trolley lines for King County Metro are also attached the underside of the skybridge.

As part of their application to the Seattle Design Commission (SDC) and the City to reauthorize the skybridge, the applicant provided the following reasons for retaining the skybridge:

1. It provides code required access that meets American with Disability Act (ADA) requirements for hotel guests parking in the adjacent garage
2. It provides emergency egress
3. It provides utilities, including internet access, for the hotel
4. It provides King County Metro with an important attachment for their electrical trolley bus lines
5. It continue to provide direct access from the adjacent garage to the hotel

In addition to providing information and analysis to support their request to retain the skybridge, the applicants also provided information on items for their public benefit package :

1. Street improvements along the south side of Virginia St consisting of street trees, ground level plantings, canopies along a segment of the building, and a pedestrian lighting fixture on the building.
2. Glass replacement and painting of the skybridge.

Meeting Summary

This was the SDC's first review of the project. The SDC voted 7 to 1 to approve the skybridge with a condition that the public benefit package be expanded and further developed. The SDC will require additional review of the public benefit package before it develops its final recommendations.

Commissioners Excused

Shannon Loew, Chair
Rachel Gleeson

July 16, 2015

10:30 am - 12:00 pm

Type

Skybridge

Phase

NA

Previous Reviews

None

Project Team Present

Jerry Coburn

GCH Landscape Architects

Diane Holliday Germain

Westin Hotel

Jessie Clawson

McCullough Hill, PS

Attendees

Beverly Barnett

SDOT

Ashley Blazina

SDOT Intern

Hope Estes

SDOT Intern

Amy Gray

SDOT

Glen Hoffman

Westin Hotel

Ellie Smith

SDOT Intern

Alma Weber

SDOT Intern

Seng Yeoh

Westin Hotel

July 16, 2015

Recusals and Disclosures

None

Summary of Presentation

Jessie Clawson, McCullough Hill, PS, introduced the project and their request to retain an existing skybridge. Jerry Coburn of GCH landscape architects provided information on the history of the hotel. He then presented the justification for retaining the skybridge. He stated that the only ADA access to the garage was via the hotel and skybridge. Without the skybridge, a person in a wheelchair would have to use the car ramps and car entrance on 5th Ave to get out of the garage after parking (see figure 2). Mr. Coburn explained that the skybridge is not only used by The Westin to access additional hotel parking within the garage, but also provides the emergency egress for the garage. He then stated that utilities and electrical bus lines are attached to the bridge.

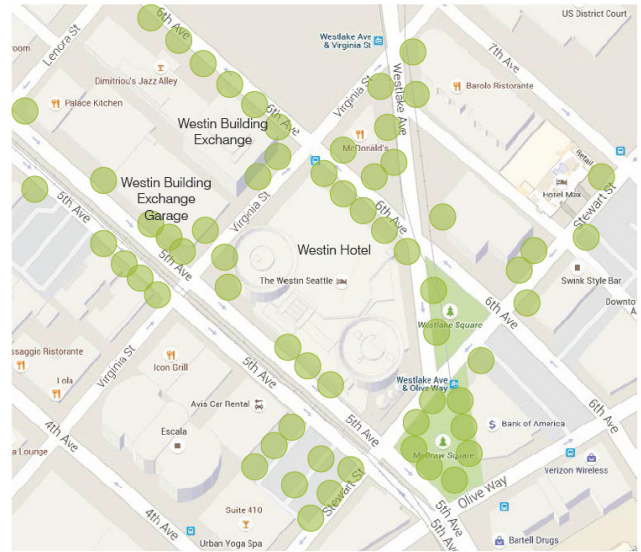


Figure 1: Site Vicinity Context Map

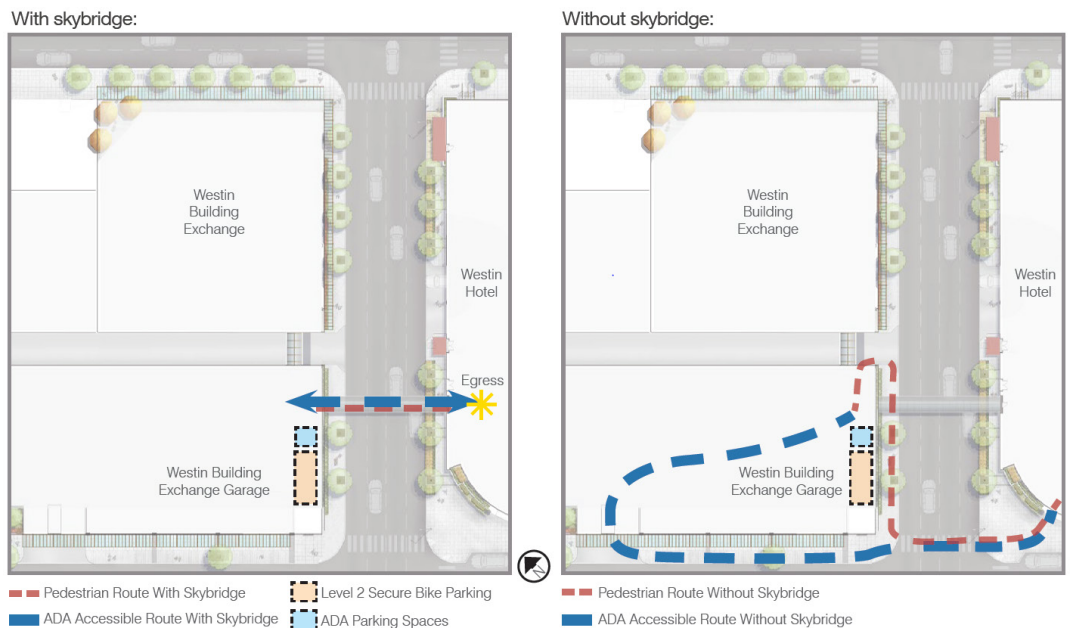


Figure 2: Accessibility Diagram with (left) and without (right) the skybridge

Mr. Coburn then described the public benefit mitigation items that were being provided. First, he went over improvements that had been made around the perimeter of the Westin Hotel block as context. He then presented the improvements to the streetscape of Virginia St that were proposed as public benefit. These included street trees and plantings along most of the south side of Virginia St from 5th Ave to 6th Ave, a small canopy over a door mid-block and canopy at the corner of Virginia and 6th Ave. New paint and lighting were also proposed for the skybridge itself.

Jessie Clawson explained that the choice was between spending money to remove the skybridge or investing it in the streetscape along Virginia St.

Agency Comments

Beverly Barnett, SDOT, spoke representing the City's Skybridge Review Committee. She explained that skybridges were no longer the method of choice for connecting pedestrians to buildings downtown. There is an understanding now that this takes life off the streets, so the City policies lay out a conservative framework for allowing them. She stated that the permit for the subject skybridge had expired and that the expectation was that the skybridge would be removed unless there was a compelling reason to retain it. She pointed to the changes in the area that were transforming the blocks around the site. There would be more people on the block soon, the Westin would have reasons as a neighbor, and business to respond with improvements along what historically has been a neglected side of the hotel.

Public Comments

There were no public comments.

Summary of Discussion

The Commissioners discussed the proposal using four categories:

1. Impacts on the pedestrian environment
2. The skybridge's role in providing accessible routes to the hotel
3. The overall design of the bridge
4. The proposed public benefit package.

1. Impacts on the pedestrian environment

The Commissioners agreed that the street where the skybridge is located is not a friendly environment, but that the skybridge was only one determining factor when evaluating the surrounding environment. The facades on both sides of the street were noted to have a "back of house" quality (see figure 3). The only property along the block likely to redevelop is the garage on the north side of the street, to which the skybridge connects. Because the skybridge ordinance would be linked to the garage, if the garage were redeveloped the ordinance would "expire."



Proposed Public Benefits - Elevation



Existing Street Elevation

Figure 3: proposed and existing conditions along Virginia St.

2. The skybridge's role in providing accessible routes

Staff pointed out that ADA parking was limited to one floor and that potential for more was limited given the garage configuration. While the necessity of the skybridge to meet ADA was not confirmed by the SDC, the convenience value was recognized.

3. The overall design of the Skybridge

The Commission did not recognize replacement of the tinted glass with clear glass as a public benefit; they did agree



Figure 1: Proposed Streetscape along Virginia St.

it would help reduce the visual impact of the skybridge. They saw it as a baseline improvement that should be made if the skybridge were to remain. They added that lighting should also be considered in order to lighten up the heavy appearance of the bridge.

4. The proposed public benefit package

While the SDC found the proposed improvements would benefit the streetscape of Virginia (see figure 4), they did not believe the benefits went far enough to enhance the pedestrian experience. The street trees were considered a valuable piece of the public benefit package. Commissioners suggested that the skybridge itself be considered more carefully in the design for pedestrian improvements. It was suggested the design team focus on pedestrian lighting as well as other public benefits that were located along the mid-block instead of the intersections.

Action

The Design Commission thanked the project team for presenting the Westin Skybridge public benefit package. With a vote of 7 to 1 the Seattle Design Commission recommended conditional approval of the Westin Hotel skybridge ordinance for the skybridge over Virginia St between 5th Ave and 6th Ave. The commission requested that the project return for a review of the proposed public benefit package, once the public benefit package had been expanded and improved. That includes such features as:

1. Street improvements along the south side of Virginia St consisting of street trees, ground level plantings, canopies along a segment of the building, and a pedestrian lighting fixture on the building.
2. Seek to engage the property owner of the parking garage that the skybridge connects to in providing improvements to the streetscape of Virginia St.

Grant Hromas voted no because he believes the existing skybridge would not meet the standards for design a new skybridge would. Also, he questions how long the skybridge will be necessary and relevant given how quickly the public realm of area is transforming.